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**FOLLOWING THE WIND (跟风):
NAVIGATING CHINESE DURIAN FARMERS' IDENTITY
AND PRACTICES IN BALIK PULAU, PENANG**

Penny Wong Pui Yan
20380287

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Under the supervision of
Dr Khoo Gaik Cheng (first supervisor)
Dr Lim Khay Thiong (second supervisor)

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Abstract

For generations since the mid-19th century, the Hakka Chinese have settled on the hills of Balik Pulau, the quiet backwaters of Penang Island. They ‘followed the wind’ as pragmatic smallholder farmers to cultivate the land, growing nutmeg and cloves as well as seasonal tropical fruits. Today, many of them are durian farmers whose grandfathers and fathers pioneered the durian industry in Penang and introduced well-known Penang varieties like Khun Poh, Ang Hae, Green Skin 15, 604, and others to Malaysia and beyond. This thesis aims to explore the Balik Pulau durian industry through the lens of durian farmers’ practices who are predominantly Hakkas. Employing practice theory as the theoretical framework, data gathered from in-depth semi-structured interviews and field observation on durian farms reveal that their practices have transitioned throughout the 1950s to the 2020s. This transition can be categorised into three phases: the genetic experimentation of durians, the narrowing and standardisation of durian varieties, and the marketing and sales of durians through value-added services. These phases demonstrate the reconstruction of the durian farmers’ socio-cultural identity: from farmer to agropreneur. Most durian farmers find little to no occupational affinity between being a Hakka person and agricultural work, signifying a low level of Chinese speech group consciousness. Instead, their socio-cultural identity is primarily shaped through their daily activities and improvisation of practices on the farm. The creativity and improvisation of their early work in the 1950s played a crucial role in the initial growth of the durian industry in Balik Pulau, paving the way for the emergence of the current durio-tourism scene in Penang today. Durio-tourism highlights durian diversity, representing the Hakka durian farmers’ drive for innovation. This is evident in their efforts to breed various durian varieties and adapt to modern resources to enhance yield. This distinguishes them from durian farmers from other states, who focus on exporting predominantly Musang King to China. In Penang, tourists from China are taught to widen their palate and taste different types of durians apart from Musang King. The durian farmers regard their roles not just as farmers, but as cultural ambassadors of Penang durians in the tourism industry.

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Glossary

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DOA	Department of Agriculture
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
EPU	Economic Planning Unit
FAMA	Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority
FRGS	Fundamental Research Grant Scheme
KTMB	Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad
MCO	Movement Control Order
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture
MyGAP	Malaysian Good Agricultural Practices
NAP	National Agricultural Policy
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
RRIM	Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia
SALM	Skim Akreditasi Ladang Malaysia
SERI	Socio-economic & Environmental Research Institute

Introduction

The genesis of this research was very much inspired by my visit to Kie Ngim Zui farm along Jalan Tun Sardon in Balik Pulau, Penang.¹ I could vividly remember the landscape of his farm filled with various tropical fruit trees, primarily durians overlooking the west coast of Balik Pulau.² As I walked along the narrow rocky pathway with my sandals and donated my blood to the mosquitoes, I was mesmerised by Kie Ngim Zui's wealth of knowledge of the various plants' functions which looked all the same to me. These plants were necessary to help them live on the hills; he joked, 'All those who survived are those who ate herbs.' There were also remnants of old tools his grandfather used on the farm, such as a terracotta vessel where they stored urine and fish refuse to be fermented and made into fertilisers, and stone walls built to prevent landslides. 'These are all Hakka culture,' Kie Ngim Zui mentioned repeatedly. I was witnessing a living and breathing farm imbued with Hakka wisdom that was formed by the hands of his family for generations.

My curiosity was piqued, and I questioned if there was a relationship between Hakka Chinese culture and durian cultivation in Balik Pulau.³ To my disappointment, my question proved to be a fruitless attempt to find a direct connection through existing literature and interviews. However, it is through this very question that the durian farmers I have interviewed in Balik Pulau shed light on significant domains to explore, revealing their identities as Hakka durian farmers. It occurred to me that my question exhibited an 'old

¹ Refer to Chapter Three for more information on Jalan Tun Sardon. Given that my study is set in Malaysia, where the official place names are in Malay, this thesis adheres to this convention, with the exception of the name Penang.

² This thesis only focuses on the durian species *durio zibethinus*, which is the most commonly cultivated durian variety (see Brown 1997).

³ The Hakkas, also known as Kheh or *kejia* 客家 in Mandarin, means 'guest people'. Historically, the name was coined by native populations in southern China to distinguish the Hakkas' outsidership from the local settlers, and this derogatory ethnonym remained until today. The Hakkas are one of the main Chinese speech groups living on Balik Pulau's hills. Lo Man Yuk, who compiled a list of Penang locations and street names, indicated that more Khehs inhabit some of the up-country districts. Consequently, there are Hakka names for these locations, mainly in and around Balik Pulau (1990, 235).

fashion view of culture’ (Carstens 2005, 82). It seeks to understand Hakka culture through a distinctive set of cultural markers or characteristics using the sinological anthropology approach that sees Chinese culture as essentialist and universal wherever they are. This approach limits the understanding of Hakka culture because the ‘complexity of being a Hakka grows with every generation’ (Leo 2015, 205). However, the Hakka has been ‘treated as an essential, unchanging, unproblematic label—a given or objective truth, rather than a topic for analysis in and of itself’ (Constable 1996, 4).

Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the Balik Pulau durian industry through the lens of the durian farmers’ practices. These farmers who are predominantly Hakka due to their historical immigration from China have since resided on the hills of Balik Pulau. Nevertheless, farmers of other Chinese speech groups were also found cultivating durians during the mid 1970s.⁴ The durian and its industry serve as an entryway to understand the Chinese durian farmers’ practices and how that shape their identity. This study aims to trace the changes in their practices that occur from the earliest recollection of the farmers’ memories until today. The first research question is: What are the Chinese durian farmers’ practices in Balik Pulau from the past (since the 1950s) until today? Hence, this thesis aims to apply practice theory as the theoretical framework. Practice theory delves into the activities individuals engage in their daily lives. People’s practices are used as the acting units or the reference point to understand a particular unfolding event (Ortner 1984, 149). This thesis delineates the three phases of durian farmers’ practices spanning from the 1950s until the 2020s: the genetic experimentation of durians, the narrowing and standardising of durian varieties, and the marketing and selling of durians with value-added services. These phases

⁴ In this thesis, the term ‘Chinese speech groups’ is used instead of the more commonly known ‘Chinese dialect groups’ in Malaysia. These Chinese groups ‘speak different Chinese languages rather than dialects, and so they are often referred to as speech groups’ (Tan 2000, 38). In short, these Chinese languages are mutually unintelligible.

are temporal, meaning they are not broken off as a new one from the past that is already over but inhere in the onward propulsion of the durian industry (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 3).

Chinese durian farmers' intergenerational practices since the planting of spices introduced by the British reveal that it has experienced a 'temporality of landscape'.⁵ Durian farmers have shared that the very same spot home to a durian tree today was occupied by another fruit tree and, prior to that, perhaps a rubber or spice tree. The landscape in Balik Pulau farm is 'an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in doing so, have left there something for themselves (Ingold 2000, 189). My second research question is: What is the rationale that accompanied and sustained these intergenerational Chinese durian farmers throughout the years? This is analysed in Chapter One, where I conceptualised their rationale as 'following the wind' alongside situating my research by giving a brief outlook of the history of Balik Pulau, with particular focus on the Chinese community. This concept is further explored and applied throughout the thesis.

In essence, 'following the wind' conceptualises farmers' motivations, actions, and practices as aligning with their environment and the structures that are in place, that shape them into modernistic capitalistic smallholder farmers. As they engage in these practices, they also exercise their agency to improvise creatively through their modernist imaginaries. These Chinese farmers adapted this attribute to make do with what they have and work it out as they go because life on the hills is difficult; *Orang Cina baru boleh tahan* (only Chinese people can endure).⁶ The dialectical interaction between the environment and the farmers'

⁵ This concept, developed by Tim Ingold (2000), aims to bridge the 'sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space' (189) by revealing that the 'landscape itself is shown to be fundamentally temporal' (154).

⁶ Lee Chau Yun, interview by author, Balik Pulau 20, 2021. During our interview, he recounted a conversation he had with a local Malay individual in Balik Pulau who asked where he stayed, and he replied on the hills of Balik Pulau. The Malay individual then responded the statement above.

practices fits the other aspect of practice theory, which is to bridge the dualism of structure and agency. Practice theory seeks to explain that ‘culture (in a broad sense) constructs people as particular kinds of social actors, but social actors, through their living, on-the-ground, variable practices, [would] reproduce or transform the culture that made them’ (Ortner 2006, 129). This views people’s practices as socially constructed.

To strengthen the study of the durian farmers' practices, the concept of improvisation by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold is introduced to supplement practice theory, and I demonstrate how it can be used in this thesis (2007, 1–12). According to Hallam and Ingold, there are four points to improvisation: generative, relational, temporal and the way we work. Generative is understanding that ‘nothing is created that was not designed in advance’ (5). This means that ‘copying or imitating is not the simple mechanical process of replication... but [it] entails a complex ongoing alignment of observation of the model with action in the world’ (5). The generative work of the durian farmers is seen through their experimentation phases of durian planting and grafting (see Chapter Two). Concurrently, in being generative, these durian farmers are also relational. This means they are ‘continually attuned and responsive to the performance of others’ (1), such as their relationship with other farmers in the community, the Department of Agriculture (DOA) officers, and their durian trees.

The third point is that improvisation is temporal. The durian farmers’ practices are ‘rhythmic rather than metronomic’ (10) because they embody a continuous duration. Although a new practice of selling and marketing the art of eating durians to consumers cropped up in the 1990s, the practices of narrowing and standardising durian varieties are still ongoing but take less priority. Lastly, improvisation can be observed in the way farmers work. This shows that ‘the creativity of [farmers’] imaginative reflection is inseparable from [their] performative engagement with the materials that surround [them]’ (1).

The expansion of the durian farmers' agency through improvisation helps us to comprehend better how durian farmers negotiate with the structures, forming their durian farming practices. Historically in Balik Pulau, the majority of farmers who live on the hills are of Hakka descent (Mak 1995; Constable 1996). In analysing the changes in the durian farmers' practices, the Hakka farmers' socio-cultural identity has to be taken into account, as there is an occupational affinity and continuity between a Hakka person and a farmer. Yet when this was explored, the farmers found the relationship vague and uncertain. Instead, they perceived their job as an avenue to earn a living to provide for their family. To employ Raymond William's concept, these durian farmers perceive their culture as ordinary. The practices that they perform daily are how they define their socio-cultural identity as Hakka durian farmers. This shift coincides with the socio-political arena in Malaysia, which encouraged them to emphasise their ethnic and national identity as Chinese Malaysians, thereby diminishing their Chinese speech group identity. Thus, how Hakka farmers identify themselves is similar to the other non-Hakka farmers, rendering their everyday practices as ordinary.

While it is recognized that the Hakkas and their culture played a significant role in the development of the durian industry in Balik Pulau, particularly during the 1950s through genetic experimentation of durians, it is important to acknowledge that durian cultivation, on a broader scale, is not limited to the Hakkas alone, as Malaysians of other ethnicities also engage in it. Similar to the rubber industry, it 'was never a special occupational feature of any particular dialect group except for its ecological significance indicating the residential settlement of the group' (Mak 1993, 16). While this thesis includes most of the Hakkas in Balik Pulau, it also includes perspectives of farmers from other Chinese dialect groups such as Hokkien, Foochow and Taishan.

By observing the changes in durian farmers' quotidian practices that are shaped and maintained over time, my third research question is: How has their sociocultural identity changed in light of the shift in their practices? This is analysed through two categories of farmers, namely 'Fathers' and 'Sons' in Chapter Three. Fathers are farmers who were born in the 1940s and who focused primarily on farming. This means they spent a significant amount of time working on the farm experimenting with cultivating and grafting durians from the 1950s to the 1980s. Their primary method of selling durians was through middlemen, therefore, they had minimal direct interaction with durian consumers. On the other hand, Sons are farmers born in the 1960s. While they still cultivate durians like their fathers, they experimented with selling and marketing durians directly to consumers with value-added services when durio-tourism emerged in the mid to late 1990s. This shows that the durian farmers' identity is always in production (Hall 1990), moving from a mere farmer to an agropreneur in the span of two to three generations.

The manoeuvring of identity is evident when observing the 'cultural styles' (Nonini 2017) of the farmers who 'have the flexibility to emphasise or de-emphasise other types of identities' (Carstens 2005, 55–56) such as their Chinese speech group, ethnic group, and position of power in the community. Such patterns are evident when Chinese durian farmers interact and speak with one another and with Penang DOA officers. Their performances are also influenced by my presence as a Chinese female student. In my presence, Chinese farmers would expressively or sheepishly display their agreement or disagreement with their counterparts mainly about practices in durian cultivation and the lackadaisical attitude of the government. To echo Donald Nonini, I believe 'I was always an audience for such performances' (2017, 20).

Methodology

Various methods were employed to collect primary data from two distinct groups of individuals: farmers and non-farmers. Farmers encompassed Chinese durian farmers, sellers, wholesalers, and homestay owners. Non-farmers included representatives of institutions that have a supporting role for the farmers, such as the Penang State DOA and Penang Southwest District and Land Office. The division of these groups is motivated by the use of different methods. Both groups, farmers and non-farmers, underwent semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted either onsite or via video calls, with the interviews being recorded for reference. While interview questions were organized around thematic areas, they were not rigidly adhered to, as the primary aim was to provide participants with the opportunity to share their perspectives and concerns. This approach allowed the research themes to evolve organically in response to the participants' insights. Consequently, the interviews were designed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of overarching themes and issues, rather than being solely focused on quantifiable data.

Interviews with individuals in the non-farmer category were conducted in formal office settings and typically lasted from one to two hours. In contrast, interviews with farmers were more flexible and tailored to their location preferences. These interviews were conducted in informal settings: through video calls via Zoom, in Chinese coffee shops, cafes, durian farms, and their homes. The duration of these interviews ranged from one to three hours. For farmers whom I interviewed outside of the durian farm, a follow-up interview at the durian farm was proposed. The first interview served to establish rapport with farmers, and it allowed them to gain a better understanding of my research intentions. By building trust during the first interview, these farmers then became more comfortable with the idea of allowing me on their durian farms. Subsequently, I have kept in touch with some of my interviewees, both farmers and non-farmers, using the messaging application WhatsApp. This

allowed the ‘dissemination of information, memories, narratives, and emotions that rarely circulate through other channels’ to take place (Ardizzoni 2022, 71).

Conducting onsite interviews and field visits with the durian farmers were only possible during non-durian seasons ranging from January to early May and late July to December. During the durian season, farmers were occupied with harvesting and selling their durians. These farmers personally advised me not to come during the durian season because my requests would not be entertained. With the constrained time frame and COVID-19 lockdowns in Malaysia, I made four trips to Penang ranging from a few days, two weeks to a month between May 2021 to March 2022.⁷ From February to March 2022, most of the interviews were conducted with non-farmer participants.

The spoken language in my interviews involved code-switching between Mandarin, Hakka, English and Malay. Generally, interviews with farmers were conducted in Mandarin, unless the farmer had English literacy. Even then, code-switching was used to best express themselves. Therefore, in accordance to Yong (2013, 205) I have decided to retain certain phrases ‘in the original language(s) before attempting to translate them into English, in part because a translation loses the original feeling or meaning and also because certain words, phrases, or expressions are difficult, if not impossible to translate directly into English’. The Mandarin expressions and words are accompanied by Hanyu Pinyin romanisation system and their closest English translation (The University of Chicago 2017, 11.82). On the other hand, Hakka and Hokkien language pronunciations are transcribed without a consistent system of

⁷ The interview and field visit arrangement proved challenging due to a series of Malaysia Government Movement Control Orders that were implemented throughout 2021. On the 10th of May, I started my research in Penang and after three days, the government announced that Movement Control Order (MCO) 3.0 was enforced in Penang. Hampered by the situation, I attempted to conduct digital ethnography methods (see Pink et al. 2016). However, this method proved unsuccessful as most of them were not keen to have the interview over a video call. The unreliable internet connection stability on the farm presented another hurdle. There were also cases where farmers were infected with COVID-19 or had a close contact status on MySejahtera (an application developed by the Malaysian government to manage COVID-19 outbreak), resulting to interviews being postponed or conducted via video call on Zoom.

romanisation, reflecting and capturing the versions given by my interlocutors, in order to ‘retain the local flavour’ (Yong 2013, 200).⁸

Based on the theoretical framework—practice theory, this thesis examines people’s practices and farming as an embodied experience. Thus, methods that involved observing durian farmers’ everyday life were preferred, such as ethnographic methods, mainly participant observation. In this manner, the methods employed allow the researcher to attain a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies involved in durian cultivation and farm management. Unfortunately, due to challenges posed by the pandemic, my research method relied heavily on interviews. Hitchings (2012) argues that interviews on people’s practices should not be discounted or seen as superficially inappropriate because people can often provide valuable insights into their own action through conversation.⁹

Besides researching durian farmers’ current practices, this thesis also seeks to trace the historical development of their practices and the durian industry in Penang. Therefore, interviewing them about their practices serves as a form of oral history as the interview facilitates them to recollect their memories and experiences. Oral tradition reveals the past and the significant parts of the world, and we can know our participants from the inside (Vansina 1985, 198). The farmers’ memories are ‘subject[s] as well as [a] source of oral history’ (Loh, Koh, and Thomson 2013, 3). Memory studies are less concerned with reconstructing the past than they are with understanding the influences on social and cultural memory and the relationship between memory and public narratives (3). This methodology is instrumental in constructing the concept of ‘following the wind’ (see Chapter One) and in elucidating the Chinese durian farmers’ cultural styles (see Chapter Three).

⁸ Although some of these Hakka farmers spoke the Huizhou Hakka language, it sounded slightly different from the Huizhou Hakka language I am familiar with growing up in Kuala Lumpur.

⁹ In his journal article, he provided four tips for conducting interviews focused on people’s practices, which was helpful for my research. These four tips are: (1) asking about the seemingly obvious and mundane aspects of their lives, (2) presenting alternatives using hypothetical situations, (3) allowing time through serial approaches, (4) attending to how respondents react (see Hitchings 2012, 66).

The interview participants were selected through a combination of judgement or purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods (Blaikie 2000, 199). To find farmers, I googled keywords such as ‘Balik Pulau durians’, ‘durian homestay in Balik Pulau’, and ‘Penang durians’. Numerous suggestions appeared on Google Maps, blogs, and media company websites. There were two specific criteria that guided my selection of farmers: (1) they should be Chinese durian farmers based in Balik Pulau and (2) preferably, they should belong to an intergenerational line of farmers. There was no restriction to interviewing only Hakka durian farmers because it was necessary for my research to explore and discover both the differences and similarities in farming practices among the Chinese speech groups of durian farmers. The majority of farmers I interviewed fell under the ‘Sons’ category.

For the non-farmers category, I obtained their contact through durian farmers and by visiting their offices. Another source of primary data that I used was interviews with durian farmers and agrochemical companies that I conducted with Dr Khoo Gaik Cheng as her research assistant.¹⁰ Secondary data were obtained through analysing archives of colonial reports, journal articles, books and newspapers mainly on Balik Pulau and Penang, Chinese culture and identity—particularly concerning the Hakkas, and the agricultural and durian industries to supplement and enrich the primary sources.¹¹

The total number of participants interviewed was 25. Twenty of them were farmers, four of them were from the Penang DOA and Penang Southwest Land and District Office, and one was a fertiliser seller in Balik Pulau. The majority of the durian farmers were Hakka, except for five durian farmers who were of different Chinese speech groups. Of the five

¹⁰ The research title is ‘Developing a Sustainable and Ecological Model for Durian as a Future Commercial Crop in Malaysia’ under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) of the Ministry of Education Malaysia in 2020.

¹¹ A limitation of this thesis is my inability to make use of Chinese literature because I am unable to read fluently in Mandarin. Danny Wong (2007, 250) pointed out that there are obvious differences in Chinese and English writers of Malaysian Chinese history. The language gap leads to different writing approaches and the selection of sources used. Due to my language limitations, this thesis aligns more closely with the perspectives of English-language writers.

farmers, three were Hokkien, and the remaining two were Cantonese/Hakka and Teochew/Foochow (Refer to Appendix A). All participant names under the farmer and non-farmer categories were pseudonyms unless stated otherwise.

Chapter 1: The Background of Balik Pulau Chinese Durian Farmers

‘黄金十年 *huangjin shi nian!*’ exclaimed Chang Boon Hao. He proudly labelled the durian industry's status in the last decade as the golden decade.¹² We sat around the table outside Benny Wong's farmhouse where I was chatting with durian farmers in Balik Pulau. As they threw around figures to compare durian prices in the past with today's rates, they lamented about how difficult life was during the 2000s because durian prices were at an all-time low then.¹³ Durian farmers and newspaper articles attributed the spur of the golden decade of durian to the late Stanley Ho, a casino tycoon from Macau (*China Press* 2020; *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* 2020). In 2010, he bought 88 Musang King durians in Singapore worth almost RM4,000 (US\$1,245) and transported them back to Macau in his private jet. He gifted ten of these Musang King durians to his friend, Li Ka Shing. Ho's purchase wielded significant influence, sparking excitement in Hong Kong and China and subsequently driving a surge in demand for Musang King durians.

Two years before Ho's historic move, in May 2008, efforts to export Malaysian durians to China were already in place as China signed the export protocol in agreement with Malaysia to export frozen durian pulp to China. This came into fruition three years later, in May 2011 (FAMA n.d.). Ten years later, in May 2018, another agreement was signed to export frozen whole durians to China, and within a year, the first batch of nitrogen frozen whole durians was shipped to China (FAMA n.d.). It was a historical moment for Malaysia. The majority of the durians exported are Musang King, and lately Black Thorn, a recent durian breed highly sought after (Tim 2019; Durai 2022).¹⁴ The government initiatives

¹² Chang Boon Hao, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 25, 2021.

¹³ The average durian farm price in the 2006 is RM2.00 (US\$0.54) per kilogram and in 2020 is RM18.79 (US\$4.32) per kilogram. It has increased 800 percent over the past 14 years (DOA 2008; 2020).

¹⁴ Durian exports to China is not only limited to Musang King and Black Thorn but any *durio zibethinus* species according to the agreement. Exporters tend to focus on Musang King and Black Thorn because they have ideal qualities for export.

between the two countries were attempts to fulfil the appetite of the rapidly growing consumer-oriented Chinese middle class who had 'taken on experimenting with new food as a form of status seeking and cultural capital' (Airriess 2020b).

From 2010 to 2019, the average annual growth rate of durian consumption in China was more than 16 per cent (Philip 2021). China consumers' enthusiasm for durian reached new heights, with durians being used in savoury dishes that are uncommon in Malaysia such as pizza, hotpot, and chicken soup. Hence, it is not a surprise that China is the top importer of durians, which accounts for 60 to 80 per cent of global durian imports (Safari et al. 2022). About 90 per cent of China's total durian imports come from Thailand, but in recent years, besides Malaysia, Vietnam and Philippines have also started to export durians to China (Xinhua 2023b; Qi 2023). The competitive price of durian due to its high demand and low supply has spurred regional competition among Southeast Asian countries and this is also supported by the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Xinhua 2023a). China is also in discussion with Laos and Cambodia to import durians to China as early as 2025 (*The Star* 2022; Jing Zang 2023b). All of the above shows that there is an over-dependency on the China market which will affect the lives of durian farmers and the industry if China were to cut off supply.

Before Musang King was introduced to the China market, Monthong, known as Golden Pillow from Thailand was the most popular durian consumed in China. Today, the preferred choice, at least in Southern China is shifting to Musang King, a premium Malaysian variety (Safari et al. 2022). It is known to be premium because of the taste and texture quality: the durian pulp is bitter-sweet, custardy, and soft when compared to Monthong which is mainly sweet, firm and crunchy. Additionally, the harvesting method of allowing the durian to be fully ripened and fall from the tree naturally also contributes to the premium

Musang King value. In 2019, the price of Musang King is five times more expensive than Monthong (*Fresh Plaza* 2019). The popularity of Musang King is on the rise as Vietnam and Hainan, China have also planted Musang King (*Utusan Malaysia* 2023; Jing Zang 2023a).

In 2023, to commemorate Malaysia-China's 50th diplomatic relationship, Malaysia will most likely be able to export fresh durians to China by next year (*Malay Mail* 2023). This will escalate the upscaling of durian production which has been increasing since 2010. These plantations ranging from small to large-sized durian plantations mainly cultivate Musang King for export as it fetches a high and consistent price. The plantations are mainly nestled in Pahang, Johor and Kelantan taking up thousands of hectares. To a certain extent, some of these plantations encroach on permanent forest reserves causing environmental issues and displacing Orang Asli (Amir Yusof 2019b; Ellis 2018; *Straits Times* (Singapore) 2018). Small to midsized durian farmers in Pahang are also aiming for the export market by transitioning from D24, a renowned variety from the 1980s to cultivating the Musang King.¹⁵ In 2019, the price of Musang King in China fetched up from US\$28.61 to US\$42.92 (Neo 2020). Given the high price, agricultural land that is planted with Musang King can go up to RM500,000 (US\$120,000) for an acre in Raub, Pahang an area famous for Musang King durians (Amir Yusof 2019a). As Musang King takes centre stage among the other durian varieties in Malaysia, will Malaysia face the threat of losing its durian diversity?¹⁶

Keeping that question in mind, this thesis presents a different landscape of the durian industry on Penang Island, known for its remarkable durian diversity. The majority of durian cultivation is concentrated in the Southwest district of Penang Island, accounting for 92 per cent as of 2020 (DOA 2020). The main town in this region is Balik Pulau. A typical durian

¹⁵ Based on unpublished FRGS interviews with Pahang durian farmers.

¹⁶ The DOA has registered 141 durian varieties as of August 2020, although many of these varieties no longer exist (DOA n.d.). Nevertheless, there are also many unregistered durian varieties that are popular among locals and available in the market.

farm in Balik Pulau today has almost 20 to 30 different varieties planted on rocky and terraced terrains pioneered by Chinese durian farmers, who are mainly Hakka and living on the hills since the 1950s. This paints a contrasting picture with the commercial durian farms elsewhere in Malaysia. Many of these Hakka farmers are smallholders and have been cultivating the soils and planting various commercial tree crops for at least three to five generations. For the past 40 years, durian trees remained the primary choice of cash crop. As of 2022, Chinese durian farmers manage a substantial portion of durian production in Balik Pulau, accounting for 72 per cent of the total area of 732.80 hectares (DOA Penang 2022).¹⁷ This begs the question: why is the durian industry in Penang different and how unique are Balik Pulau durians?

To address these questions, this chapter examines the farmers' rationale of 'following the wind', which reveals their motivations for both initiating and sustaining durian cultivation. This rationale underpins the modernist capitalistic mindset as farmers aim for crops that offer the highest return on investment. Applying practice theory, it is evident that although the farmers are guided by market demands, it was through this 'following' that they had the agency to create and initiate the breeding of various durian varieties. These farmers learned to continually improve their durian varieties and improvise their practices on the farm. This chapter aims to formulate a framework for understanding these Chinese Balik Pulau farmers, which will be consistently applied throughout subsequent chapters. Before diving into this topic, background information on Balik Pulau and the Hakka people is necessary for adequate context.

¹⁷ The data represents only registered farmers under the DOA. Encik Halim mentioned that there are many more farmers who are not registered, but efforts are increasing because of the importance of MyGAP certification.

1.1 Walking through the History of Balik Pulau

‘To tell the story of durian, you must include the nutmeg, cloves and rubber trees too’.¹⁸

Balik Pulau is one of the largest constituencies in Penang, encompassing 15 of the 22 districts in Penang. It extends from Sungai Pinang down to Pulau Betong, amounting to a land size of 175 square kilometres (DOSM 2021). Agriculture has always been the backbone of Balik Pulau since the colonial era. Coastal areas such as Pantai Acheh and Kuala Sungai Pinang are fishing villages. The hilly terrains adjacent to Penang's north-south hill range is populated with a variety of commercial perennial trees planted over different decades. Between the coastal areas and the hill range lie plains of paddy fields, accompanied by towering coconut trees. This outlook of Balik Pulau has mostly stood the test of time compared to former agricultural towns such as Sungai Ara and Relau, which were rapidly urbanised in the 1970s (Nor Azmi Baharom 1979).

¹⁸ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

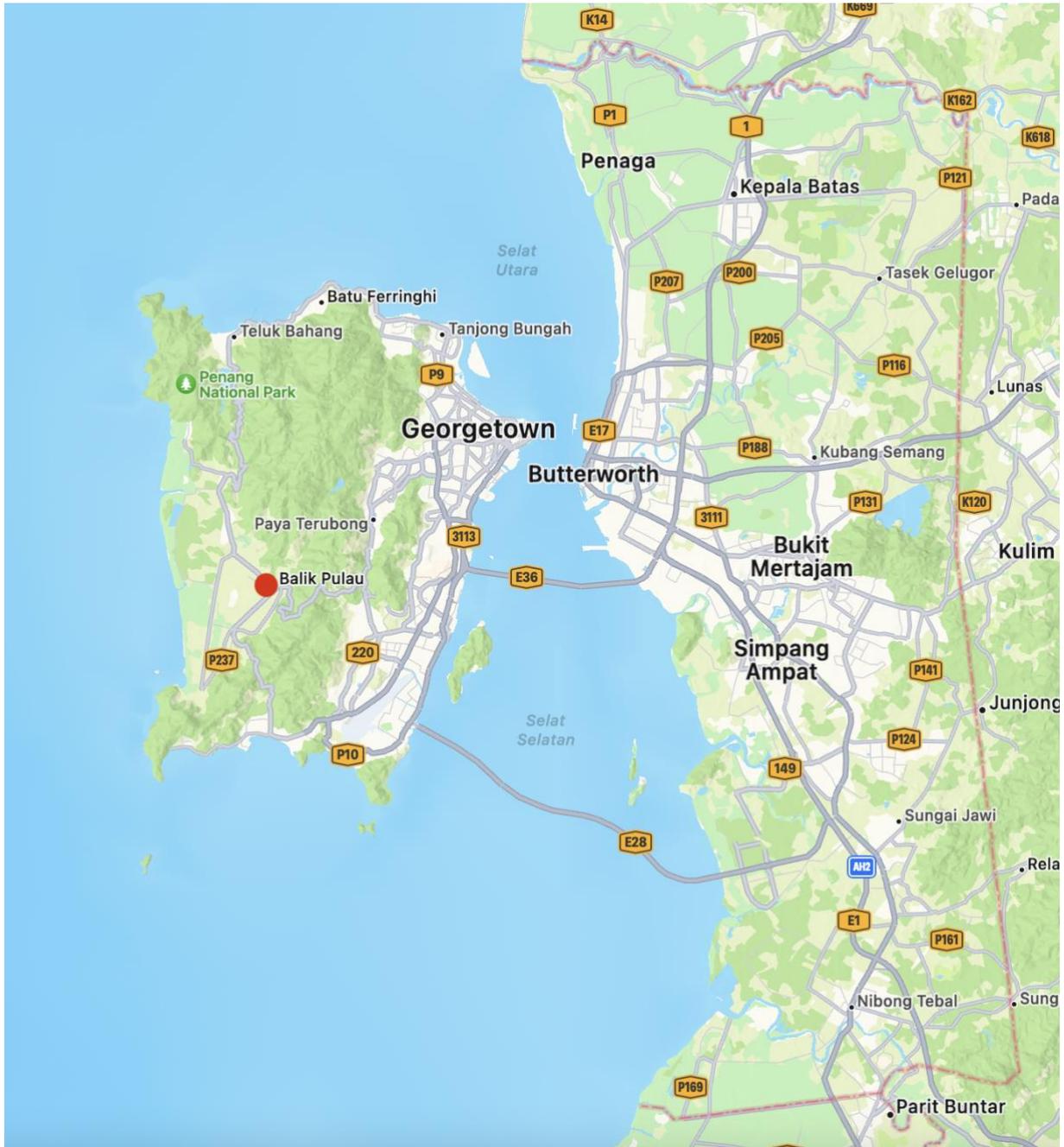


Figure 1: A map of Penang Island and the mainland

Source: Screenshot from Apple Maps

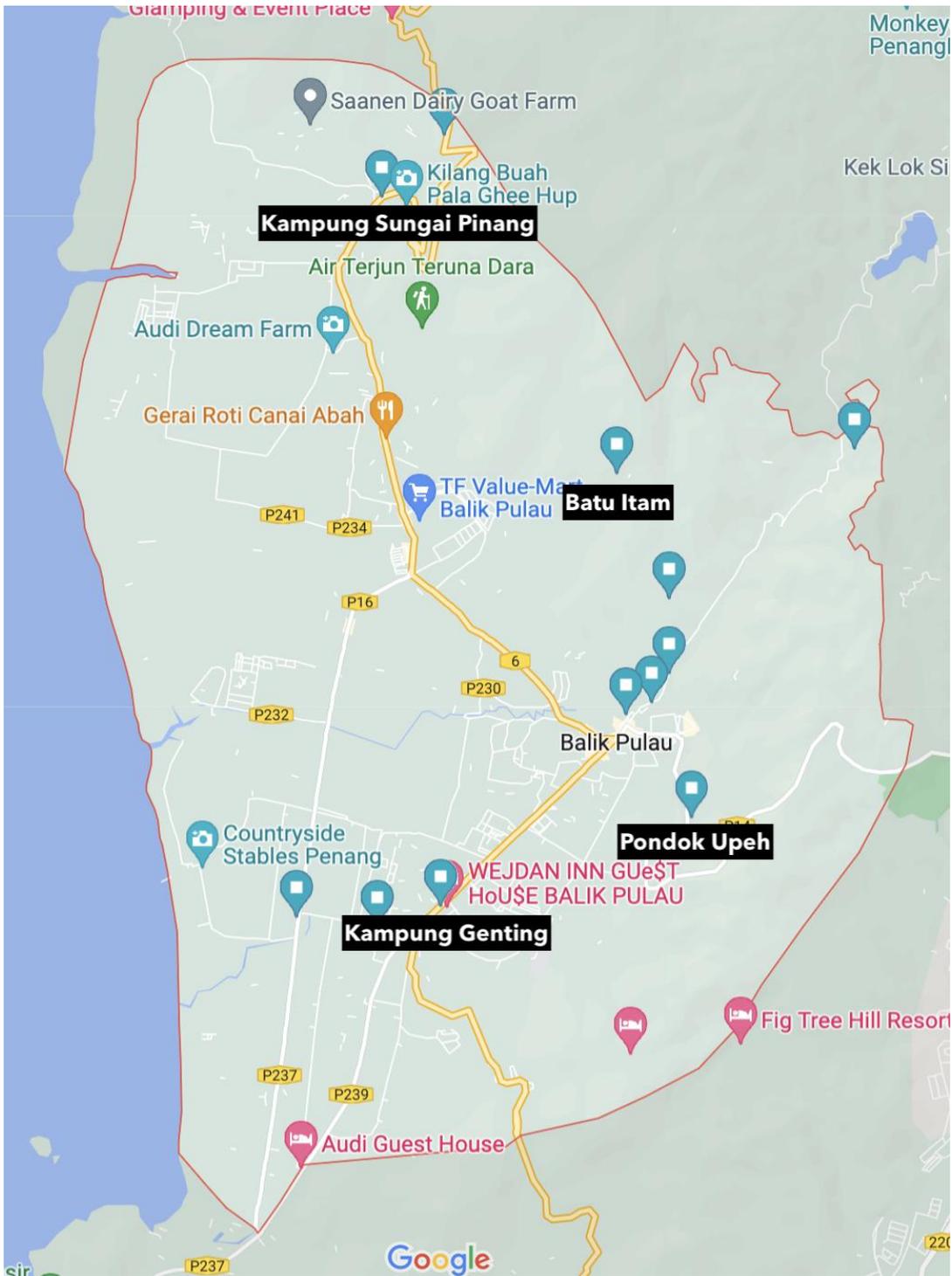


Figure 2: The locations of the durian farms in Balik Pulau

Source: Screenshot from Google Maps and annotated by the author

The history of the quaint and quiet town of Balik Pulau is not well documented (Wen 1979; Mohd Nasser Malim 2016).¹⁹ Socially and politically, the area hardly saw events of note, and efforts to document the everyday life of working-class farmers and fishermen were minimal (Hill and Shin 1990, 194).²⁰ Even though agriculture is an important industry for the state of Penang, it has dwindled over time (Singh, Rasiah, and Wong 2019). Sidelining of the agricultural industry is partially attributed to the industrialisation efforts since the 1970s led by then Chief Minister of Penang, Dr Lim Chong Eu. The shift was crucial due to the high unemployment rate in Penang (Said 2019). During that period, people were leaving Balik Pulau for better job prospects; as one farmer noted, ‘Some of us went to the valley to earn a living and marry Hokkien girls’. George Town has always been more well associated with Penang compared to Balik Pulau. It is the capital, a colonial city, and a port formerly managed by the East India Company in 1786 and later by the British government when Penang gained the Straits Settlement status (Turnbull 2009, 30; Khoo 2012, 21).

A Penang historian, Marcus Langdon wrote that the history of Balik Pulau has been a continuous source of controversy (2013, 56). To this day, the origin and meaning behind the name Balik Pulau remain unknown. The name, initially spelled as ‘Balih Pulo’, first appeared on the 1952 map of Penang Island. However, the earliest written record of Balik Pulau was first described by Jeremiah McCarthy, an assistant surveyor to the East India Company in 1807 (Langdon 2013). Even then, the name Balik Pulau was not explicitly stated anywhere in the report. Instead, it only indicated that McCarthy had visited the western part of the island. Interestingly, locations such as Sungai Burung and Sungai Pinang were mentioned in the report, both of which are a part of Balik Pulau today.

¹⁹ This view was also expressed by Lim Sok Swan, a researcher from Penang Institute, in her feature article on Balik Pulau for the Penang Monthly (Lim and Syafiqah Nazurah Mukhtar 2021). She noted unlike George Town which is well researched and documented, information on Balik Pulau was scarce. This lack of information also extends to other districts in Penang, such as Seberang Perai (see Lim 2022).

²⁰ Efforts were made in 2010 by ArtsEd (Persatuan Pendidikan Seni Pulau Pinang) researchers to collaborate with local school children in Balik Pulau to collect its town’s oral history (Pilai et al. 2010).

Other earlier names found were Bali Pulo (Jackson 1968) and Balley Pulo (Low 1972), which sound similar when spoken. There are various interpretations of the name today. The official name of Balik Pulau is in Bahasa Malaysia given by the local Malays, meaning (1) to return to the island or (2) behind the island that is adjacent to the hill range located in the middle of the Penang Island (Choo 1998, 7; Mohd Nasser Malim 2016, 17). A journal article published in 1900 titled, 'Chinese Names of Streets in Penang' by Lo Man Yuk wrote that Balik Pulau is referred to as *Phu lo* 浮炉 in Hokkien and *San poi* 山背 in Hakka (1900, 235). These Chinese language names are still evident today as Penang locals refer to Balik Pulau as *Pu lor* and when conversing in Hakka with Balik Pulau farmers, *San poi* was used occasionally. The literal translation of *San poi* is 'behind the hills'. The Mandarin name of Balik Pulau used today is *Fuluoshanbei* 浮罗山背, interpreted as '*Fuluo*, the place behind the hills. Since *Fuluo* and Pulau sound similar, it could also mean 'the island behind the hills' (Pilai et al. 2010). Technically, there is no island, but Choo said, 'Perhaps the Chinese version is given to describe a place so secluded that it is approximated as an island, a refuge far behind the hills' (1998, 7).

Balik Pulau is home to various ethnic groups. It was founded by the Malay people who migrated from Kedah, Perlis, Aceh (northwest Indonesia) and southern Thailand who settled in the valley (Langdon 2013, 57; Mohd Nasser Malim 2016, 4) while the Hakkas mainly populated the hills of Balik Pulau. Dr Cheah See Kian, the chairman of the Penang Hakka Association (2000-2003), claimed that when Francis Light founded Penang in 1786, there were already a small number of Hakkas living in Balik Pulau (Zhang and Zhang 2011, 198), but based on Francis Light's account, prior to his presence there, there was no Chinese settlement on the island (Tregonning 1966, 35). It is unsure when the Hakkas arrived in Balik Pulau since the earliest colonial record only mentioned Malay inhabitants, but an 1818 census revealed that there were Chinese people there (Langdon 2013, 58).

The earliest Hakka association was established in 1801 in Penang by the Jiaying Hakkas (Yen 2000, 4). Adding to the evidence of early Hakka presence is a tombstone in Mount Erskine that belonged to a Hakka person from Jiaying Prefecture dated 1801 or 1802 (Wong 2016, 20). The cemetery where the tombstone was located was likely established in 1790 or earlier. Nevertheless, the Jiaying Hakkas might not be the pioneers in Balik Pulau as the majority of the Hakkas in Balik Pulau are from Huizhou (Wen 1979). Huizhou Prefecture is located in the southeastern part of Guangdong (Yen 2008, 385). One of the earliest known presence of the Hakkas in Balik Pulau can be found in Xuan Wu Temple, which was said to be built by the early Hakka settlers in 1800 (Pilai et al. 2010). Another indicator of early Hakka activity is the Church of the Holy Name of Jesus, a Catholic church that once conducted its services in Hakka (Zhang and Zhang 2011, 9). The church was established in 1854. When spice planting was abandoned by the European residents in the 1860s, Hakka farmers took up the task in the 1870s (Jackson 1968, 127; Choo 2020, 10). Oral accounts from Hakka farmers reveal that their earliest ancestors came to the area as coolies to work on plantations until they could free themselves from their employees (either a British or a Chinese towkay) and used the money saved to purchase their piece of land.²¹ They started cultivating nutmeg and clove trees, as encouraged by the British in order to supply the demand for these spices in the European market.²²

Another source of evidence regarding the Hakka farmers comes from an educational glossary produced by the Hakkas for children. The glossary introduces various topics and principles about the everyday life of a Hakka person in Balik Pulau.²³ The book placed focus on agricultural practices such as techniques of cultivating dry rice on the hills—which are no

²¹ Durian farmers refer to coolies as *sin khak* (in Hakka) or *sinkheh* (in southern Hokkien) and it literally translates to ‘new guest’ (Yen 1986, 166).

²² The Huizhou Hakka in Bukit Mertajam, Penang also cultivated spices for the same reasons (Chan and Koay, n.d.).

²³ The glossary ‘...presents groupings of vocabular words, but not necessarily in complete sentences or coherent rhymed phrases’ (Brokaw 2007, 336 as quoted in Leo 2015, 68).

longer practiced today—and the cultivation of various fruit crops such as durian, mangosteen, rambutan, and spice trees such as nutmeg and cloves. The content of the glossary bears similarity to the Hakka glossary of Sibao Township in China, titled ‘People’s Daily Needs’, published in 1888. The glossary ‘oriented towards agriculture and it names plant and animal foods, household utensils, farming equipment, craftsmen’s tools, textiles and clothing, weights and measures, musical instruments, and also governance, etc’ (Leo 2015, 69). It served as an introduction to ‘Hakka identity based on their daily lifestyle, traditions and cultural values... reveal[ing] their language, food, traditions, customs, occupations and lifestyle’ (70). The Balik Pulau Hakka glossary is postulated to be written in the early or mid-1800s because the rubber tree crop was not mentioned. It is known that the rubber crop played an important role to these farmers when rubber trees were introduced to Penang in the early 1900s (Tai 2013, 142).

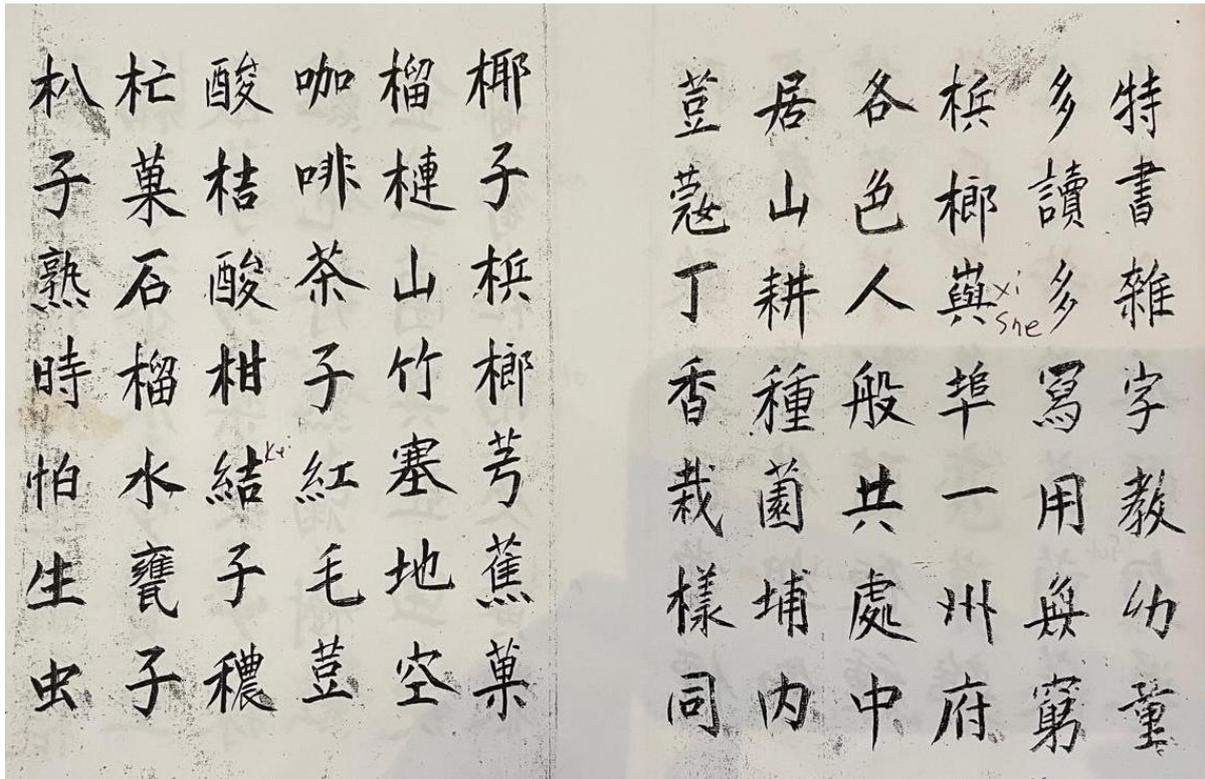


Figure 3: The first page of Balik Pulau Hakka Educational Elementary Glossary²⁴

Source: Photograph taken by the author

Since Balik Pulau's history was not well documented, the same can be said for its Hakka population as 'their lives were largely ignored in the literature of the capitalist triumphalism' (Nonini 2017, 2). Early literature concerning the Chinese community focused predominantly on the rich, community leaders, and their achievements (Yong 2013, 30). Additionally, under Japanese rule, Chinese communities were treated as a monolithic group (Gosling and Lim 1983). One of the existing records of the Hakka people in Balik Pulau is

²⁴ This glossary was introduced to me by Wong Ze Kuan. He read it in Hakka and explained the meaning of each phrase. The glossary '...presents groupings of vocabulary words, but not necessarily in complete sentences or coherent rhymed phrases' (Brokaw 2007, 336 as quoted in Leo 2015, 68). For the purpose of this thesis, only page one is shown as it is related to the agricultural scene in Balik Pulau. Reading from right to left, page one starts by introducing this glossary as a special book for children to learn Hakka principles and the importance for them to learn how to read and write. It introduces Penang as a multiethnic state where various communities, including the Hakkas, coexist. The Hakkas are people of the hills and they do agricultural work following the principles of the land. Then it proceeds to mention the crops planted with their cultivation methods. Nutmeg and cloves are finicky trees to be cultivated with love and care. Coconut, arecas, and bananas are also planted. Durian and mangosteen seeds are forcefully inserted into the rocky grounds. Rocky grounds are known to be useless because it could not plan spice trees. The other crops planted are coffee, tea, beans, mandarin oranges, calamansi, mangoes, guava, and wax apples.

the notable public figure Koh Seng Tatt, who constructed a roundabout that serves as a present-day landmark in Balik Pulau. Erected in 1882, the roundabout functions as a public water pump for the village and connects Jalan Sungai Pinang, Jalan Balik Pulau, and Jalan Bukit Penara (Choo 1998, 7). Koh Seng Tatt and his family-owned estates in Balik Pulau (Wright 1908, 755). Another acclaimed person on record is Hon Sui Sen, a former Singaporean Minister of Finance who grew up in Balik Pulau (Choo 2020, 7).

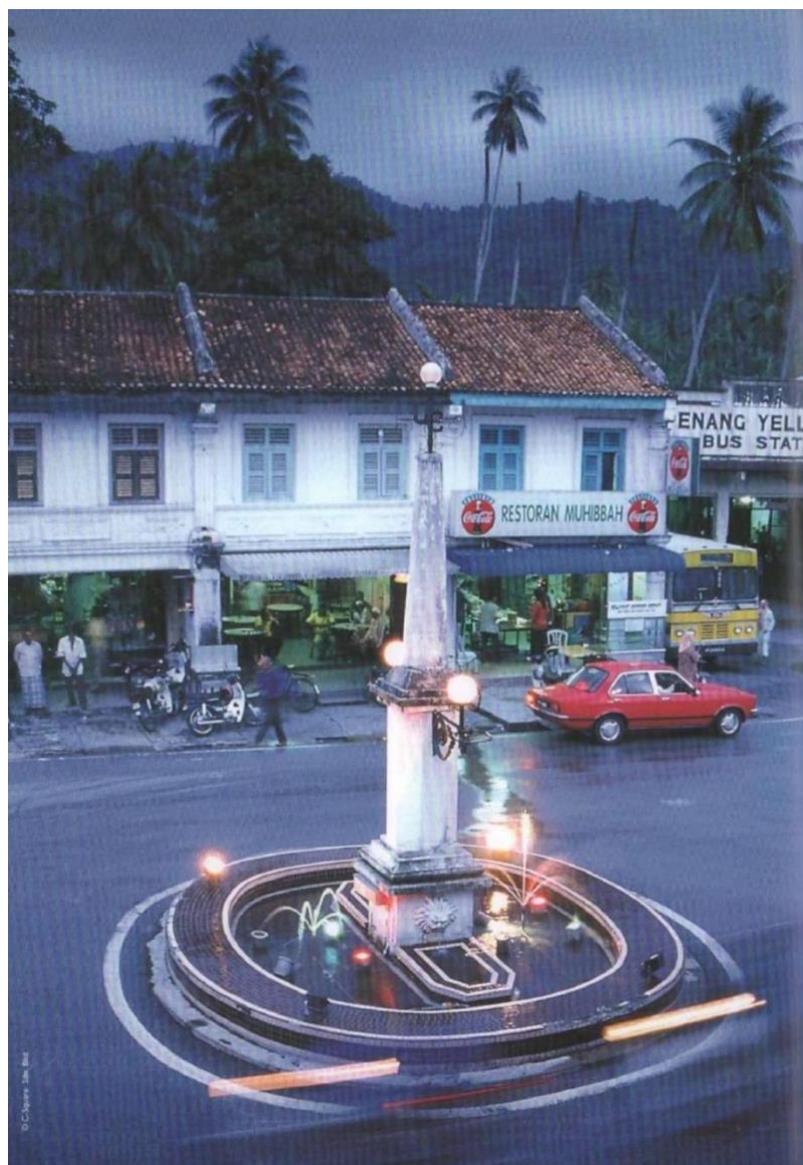


Figure 4: The Balik Pulau roundabout landmark

Source: Photograph taken from Josephine Choo's 'Balik Pulau: Return to the Island' article in *Penang Past and Present*, Issue 2, September 1998

The souvenir magazine by the Penang Hakka Association in 1979 titled *Penang Hakka Association 40th Anniversary Memorial Volume* has a brief general description of the Hakka farmers of Balik Pulau and two accounts of Hakka persons—a teacher and a plantation owner (Wen 1979). This indicated that Hakka farmers were accorded little significance even among the Hakka community. The page on membership revealed that while there are Hakka planters, the majority reside in George Town, including Pulau Tikus and only four are from the Pulau Betong area, yet none are of the Huizhou speech group. The Hakka farmers remain largely absent from the socio-political landscape in Balik Pulau. Wen (1979) noted an intriguing aspect: there were only a few successful (wealthy) Huizhou people during this time. Going back to the 1930s, the *Gazetteer of the Nanyang British Settlements* recorded 128 biographies of everyday Hakka people, 38 of whom were plantation owners of coconut, clove, and pepper crops who were grouped under the merchant category (Tan 2007). It remains unsure whether these plantation owners were also farmers.

In the year 2000, approximately 15,000 Hakkas resided in Balik Pulau out of a total of 40,000 Chinese individuals (Zhang and Zhang 2011, 198). Currently, there are no official district statistics on Chinese speech groups, but it can be inferred that one in three Chinese individuals is of Hakka descent (Choo 2020, 1). In recent years, research has been conducted focusing on the Hakka community in Balik Pulau.²⁵ Most of these studies explore issues surrounding Hakka language maintenance and management, particularly in relation to its declining usage of the Hakka language among the general populace in Balik Pulau (Wang 2015; 2016; 2017). Additionally, there are also studies conducted to understand the Hakka culture and identity in Balik Pulau. For example, in 2011, a chapter from an edited volume titled *The Analysis of the Hakkas in Balik Pulau, Malaysia* by Taiwanese scholars, Zhang

²⁵ A journal article by Michael Hsiao and Lim Khay Thiong in 2007 noted that Hakka studies is a recent and nascent phenomenon. Most discussions about the Hakka of Southeast Asia are focused on Hakka biographies of celebrated leaders, associations and local histories mainly for the purpose of Hakka association's special issues and commemorative periodicals (Michael Hsiao and Lim 2007, 8).

Hanbi and Zhang Weian was published. This article analyses the maintenance of the Hakka culture through the migrations of Hakkas from China and how it has shifted and declined in recent years in Balik Pulau (Zhang and Zhang 2011). In the same year, Jiuyi published his thesis on the nutmeg industry in Balik Pulau that delves into the role of ethnicity—specifically the Hakka community—in the nutmeg industry. The thesis also explores the Hakka community’s involvement in the structure and organisation of the nutmeg industry (Jiuyi 2011).

During my interviews with the farmers, I encountered a noteworthy saying: *feng shan you ke, ke zhu shan* 逢山有客，客住山. This is interpreted as ‘A person is not a Hakka who is not on a hill; there is no hill but has Hakka on it’ (Anusasananan 2012, 4). The proverb serves to signify the inextricable relationship between Hakka people and hills or mountains. Existing literature on Hakka studies shows that the Hakkas have inhabited the hills, where they immersed themselves in farming as a marginalised group who were unable to settle in fertile lands that were already occupied by other local Chinese people in China (Carstens 2005, 73; Leong 1997). As pointed out earlier, the Hakka name of Balik Pulau, *San poi* translates to ‘behind the hills’. The hills in question most likely refer to the north-south hill range in the middle of Penang Island. This name, *San poi* not only situates their dwelling place on the hills (Leo 2015, 179) but also underscores that the area was systematically settled upon the arrival of the Hakkas (Airriess 2020a, 10).

In the Straits Settlements, the Hakkas were a minority speech group as they were the late-comers compared to the other early Chinese immigrants, and they were surrounded by the Hokkiens who dominated the early trade sector (Yen 2000, 4; Gomez 1999, 7).²⁶ Additionally, the languages spoken in the port areas were unintelligible to the Hakkas (Yen

²⁶ In Penang, between late 1881 to 1947, the Hakkas consist of less than 10 per cent from the total percentage of Chinese people whereas the Hokkiens were between 43 to 61 per cent.

2008, 386). This led them to settle in interior rural areas.²⁷ Besides from the linguistic barrier, the Hakka people were identified as the ‘most willing among all the Chinese migrant groups, to venture into rural areas—largely because most of them had mining, hillside farming and gathering backgrounds, and were accustomed to working in remote areas throughout their own history in China’ (Wang 2023, 223 as quoted in Leo 2015, 58). In a conversation with Chong Chok Yin, a Hakka farmer, he shared that his family initially reached the coastline of Jalan Perak located in the north-east of Penang Island. Upon discovering that the coastline soil was not suitable for farming, they ventured further into the interiors of the island until they reached Balik Pulau and settled there.²⁸

When the Chinese migrated to Malaya, their occupation was closely related to their hometown in China and the language they spoke (Mak 1993, 10). The Hakkas founded mining and agricultural settlements and are known to mainly engage in traditional occupations such as carpentry, smithing, and herbal medicine (Mak 1993, 12; Tan 2000, 45; Yen 2008, 380).²⁹ The Hakkas also did not seem to be involved in economic activities near the sea (Mak 1993, 12). Chang Tuan Jin, a second-generation durian farmer in his 60s shared that when his late grandfather arrived in Penang, he landed at Kuala Sungai Pinang, a port on the west of Penang Island.³⁰ While he initially resided near the port, he later retreated to the hills at Kampung Sungai Pinang which overlooked the sea, as the flat terrain of the coastal areas were not suitable for cultivating quality nutmeg and clove trees.³¹ A traditional saying

²⁷ Census from 1991 showed that Hakka became the second largest Chinese speech group in Peninsular Malaysia, but since they were settled in rural areas, Hakka is not considered a lingua franca in most places as it is not an important language when conducting business (Tan 2000, 47).

²⁸ Chong Chok Yin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, June 8, 2021.

²⁹ There are some Hakkas who are also involved in trading, such as Zhang Bishi (Yen 2008).

³⁰ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

³¹ Kuala Sungai Pinang is home to most people from the Teochew descent. According to Tan Kim Hong (2010, 71–72), they migrated to Kuala Sungai Pinang as fishermen from China and there were records that they brought over their fishing tools to Malaya. Besides fishing, they are also involved in vegetable farming and animal husbandry.

asserts that spice trees should be grown within the sight and sound of the sea (Mason 1931, 6).

Other Chinese speech groups such as Teochew³² and Foochow³³ were also involved in agriculture but according to Hill (2013, 220), in many parts of Malaysia, farmers were predominantly Hakka since they occupied the rural areas. In other parts of the world, such as Taiwan, Hakkas—especially in Miaoli County—are noted for their pear cultivation (Huang and Ku 2013). The type of agricultural work that Hakka farmers in Malaysia engaged in varied depending on their location. While Hakkas in Balik Pulau are smallholders of commercial perennial tree crops from the beginning, Hakka communities in Pusing and Pulau were involved in subsistence farming and market gardening after the downfall of the tin mining industry (Loh 1988; Carstens 1998; Yen 2008, 383). These communities cultivated rice, vegetable and fruits. Similarly, Hakkas in Sabah are mainly subsistence farmers in areas like Kudat and Sandakan. These families migrated to Sabah as government-assisted settlers and were given plots of land, financial subsidy, and seeds (Wong 1998, 33). Hakka farmers around Malaysia were also part of the cash-crop economy planting pepper, especially in Sarawak (Yong 2013) and rubber trees (Tan 2008; Jones 2010).

The life of a farmer is difficult, as Balik Pulau farmers would lament, our job is *ri shai yu lin* 日晒雨淋; constantly scorched by the sun and drenched by the rain. The hostile environment around them, coupled with poverty, and illiteracy, fostered a culture of hard work, resilience, and frugality. As farmers, they *kao tian chifan* 靠天吃饭 (had their livelihoods at the mercy of the weather), and functioned during the colonial times as ‘cultivating subjects’ (Lees 2017) to plant crops for the European economy because ‘in

³² Balik Pulau farmers shared that the Teochews in Balik Pulau are involved in vegetable planting in the valley. In Seberang Perai, Teochews were sugar planters and in Johor, they were pepper and gambier planters (Tan 2010).

³³ See Tan (2008). She wrote about the Chinese agricultural economy in Malaysia, with particular focus on the Foochow community.

essence, the colonial state was pro-capitalist' (Loh 1988, 34). The pursuit of capitalism toward export-oriented agriculture led to the changing of the agricultural landscape in Malaysia from rubber trees in the 1900s to oil palms in the 1960s. In Balik Pulau, the Chinese labourers who were mainly Hakkas, initially focused on cultivating nutmeg and cloves (Jackson 1968, 127), before transitioning to rubber trees in the 1900s, and later opted for durian trees instead of oil palms. These crops were often intercropped, thereby diversifying the farmers' sources of income throughout the year. Wong Ze Kuan shared an account of his family farm's yearly schedule: 'As long as rubber trees are tapped, there is income all year round. Durian season falls between May to July, while cloves are harvested in November and December'.³⁴ The farmers' involvement in various markets is closely related to their history and identity.

Crops like nutmeg, cloves, coconut and rubber trees were part and parcel of these Balik Pulau farmers' childhoods. They recalled memories of climbing up a wooden ladder to pluck ripe cloves and younger siblings collecting them from the ground. As for rubber trees, Harry Liau shared in the Hakka language, '*ngai sit su ngin tai*'.³⁵ While its literal translation is, 'I grew up eating rubber', it symbolically means rubber trees were part of his everyday life growing up. The rubber trees were an integral part of the family as they provided the farmers' daily bread. Before the 1980s, durian trees were planted mainly for family consumption, and extra durians were sold to the market.³⁶ Durian trees are one of the varieties of plants farmers had around the vicinity of their houses. Therefore, most of the durian farmers I interviewed,

³⁴ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

³⁵ Harry Liau, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

³⁶ According to the farmers I interviewed, there are other fruit trees planted for family consumption and to sell as well, such as rambutans, mangosteens, and bananas. They shared that their mothers planted vegetables for the family and some families reared livestock of pigs, chickens and/or ducks. There is a dual economy among these farmers between subsistence and market economy that may have similarities with peasant or indigenous agriculture (Dove 2011). However, Hill (2013, 220) pointed out that 'the highly commercial nature of production and marketing set it off as very distinctive' for the Chinese family. The subsistence economy among the Balik Pulau farmers is mentioned less compared to cultivating food and commodities for the market.

under the Sons category, only had vague memories of durian trees until they were young adults. They remember how their fathers started to phase out rubber trees in favour of durians from the 1950s to the 1970s. Today, these farmers chop down old durian trees to graft better, more marketable durian varieties. As I listened to their accounts, detailing the transition of their commercial crop choices over the decades, it got me thinking, what influenced these shifts from one type of crop to another? How have these changes shaped the current landscape of the durian industry in Balik Pulau?

1.2 Following the Wind

Durian farmers would fondly talk about their passion and love for durians, to such an extent that they would anthropomorphise the durian tree as their wife, who would go through the cycle of pregnancy and postpartum. And yet, they would also speak candidly of chopping down their durian trees to breed better varieties. Unable to parse this seeming contradiction of chopping down their beloved durian trees, I asked the durian farmers, ‘How do you feel when you chop down your durian trees?’, ‘Do you take time to consider before chopping them down?’, ‘Do you feel sad?’³⁷ I remembered Chang Boon Hao’s reply vividly, ‘Why would I feel sad? If I do not chop it down, I will sell durians at poor prices.’³⁸ Repeatedly, durian farmers responded to my question with this statement, ‘*yinwei hao jia* 因为好价!’ (because it has a better price), implying that durian trees with lesser value in the market should be chopped down to make way for more profitable durian varieties. Lesser value also meant that the durian varieties were outdated or unstable because they had reached their peak

³⁷ In retrospect, I understand these questions impose a moral value on their actions, whose implications I only realised upon reflecting on the interviews. My questions were also partly influenced by my knowledge of traditional Malay durian farmers who also love their durian trees but have the opposite response of preserving their durian trees regardless of its varieties. For them, even culling durians was not preferred.

³⁸ Chang Boon Hao, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 28, 2021.

production. Chang Jun Yuan elaborated on the answer by saying, ‘We just want to change and improve it (the durian)’.

Words such as ‘improve’, ‘update’, ‘upgrade’ and ‘change’ were frequently invoked by these farmers when discussing the subject of grafting old durian trees. Alongside these explanations, the farmers would often say, ‘You need to follow the wind’. To ‘follow the wind’ or as the farmers would say in Mandarin, *genfeng* 跟风 is to follow the money, trends and market demand. This concept is not exclusive to durians; it applies to other crops such as nutmeg, cloves, and rubber. For instance, in the 1980s, when grafted durian trees were becoming popular, Harry Liao advised his father, ‘If you do not chop down rubber trees, you cannot follow people’.³⁹ F. R. Mason (1931, 8), an agricultural field officer of the Province Wellesley and Penang, published an article in the *Malayan Agricultural Journal*, in which he wrote that when the price of rubber was low, farmers were seen to give attention to clove trees and even plant young clove bushes to replace some poor rubber trees. There is a persistent emphasis on the economic and product development of crops among these farmers, a trend that continues today with durian trees. On the surface, ‘following the wind’ is akin to the idiom, ‘jumping on the bandwagon’. The Cambridge dictionary defines it as ‘to join an activity that has become very popular or to change your option to one that has become very popular so that you can share in its success.’⁴⁰ But as I probe deeper, there is more to being a farmer than being economically successful.

‘To follow the wind’ reveals a pragmatism among farmers, who may appear as though their choices are shaped by market forces. As Tan Pak Sin put it, ‘Certainly, to follow the wind is being realistic. You must earn money for a living. In any industry you are in, you

³⁹ Harry Liao, interview by author Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

⁴⁰ Cambridge Dictionary, s.v “jump on the bandwagon,” accessed July 15, 2020, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/jump-on-the-bandwagon>.

need to follow where the money goes. There is no choice.’⁴¹ Even though both Lee Chau Yun's father and Chang Tuan Jin's late father were unwilling to chop down their matured clove trees, they said there was no choice; they had to do it to earn a living. Lee Chau Yun said, '*hao yan wong*', expressing in Hakka that life is difficult and precarious.⁴² In the same conversation, Lee's son, Robert Lee, who is also a farmer, portrayed farmers as passive players in a market-driven environment. 'Actually, farmers are very passive. What the market wants, we will follow. We follow the wind. We are trend-oriented,' he said.⁴³ The underlying rationale of these farmers drives them to improve and change their crops, making these Chinese smallholder farmers capitalistic, exhibiting a modernist mindset.

It is unsurprising that these smallholder farmers embody a modernist ideology in their lifestyle, integrating modern values and practices into their farm management, and adopting a capitalistic outlook driven by a need for continual improvement. These Chinese farmers have been participating in the global market since they arrived in Balik Pulau, planting cloves and nutmeg that competed internationally with Zanzibar (The Department of Agriculture F.M.S and S.S 1922), reflecting the onset of capitalistic agriculture in Penang (Hill 2013, 1). As mentioned earlier, while many of these Chinese migrants came to Malaya and worked as labourers, they eventually saved enough money to buy themselves a piece of land to plant both commercial crops for the market and food crops for family consumption. Their motive for migrating to the South Sea of Malaya as destitute migrants was to hopefully seek a better life for themselves and their families, and some eventually made Malaysia their permanent home. Though many aspired to be successful merchants, only a minute percentage realised this goal. Possibly, being in a state of precarity, money and self-improvement were at the forefront of their minds as Wang Gungwu puts it, 'Chinese are not only wealth-conscious but

⁴¹ Tan Pak Sin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 21, 2021.

⁴² Lee Chau Yun, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 20, 2021.

⁴³ Robert Lee, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 20, 2021.

also status and educational conscious' (quoted in Siaw 1977, 43). The values of these farmers are reflected on the durian trees, 'If durian trees are not improved and changed to a different variety, they are like uneducated children'.⁴⁴ Hence, the focus on 'educating' both their offspring and their durian trees aims at achieving success and producing quality fruit, thereby elevating both family pride and economic standing.

The concept of Chinese capitalism is often explored through a cultural lens, focusing on its modernisation within the context of the Chinese diaspora. This perspective traces back to Confucian values that greatly emphasise networking, trust and group cohesiveness.

However, this perspective has its limitations because it tends to essentialise and homogenise the Chinese community (Gomez 2004, 8). Hence, consideration of Chinese capitalism now includes the political and socio-economic conditions of the Chinese community.

Consequently, contemporary interpretations of Chinese capitalism have expanded to include the political and socio-economic contexts within which the Chinese community operates. It is worth noting that the existing literature on Chinese capitalism primarily concentrates on Chinese businesses and firms at various scales—local, transnational, and global (see Yeung 2004; Tai 2013; Gomez 1999; Wong and Tan 2017). Therefore, this framework might not be fully applicable to the smallholder farmers in Balik Pulau. These farmers may hope to succeed, but that is often not the case. As farmers who are often part of the lower socio-economic strata, they share stories of toiling to feed one's family and how they have only prospered a little. Nonini and Ong (1997, 8) point out that any evidence about the existence of lower-class Chinese was considered 'almost heresy' at the height of the economic success of the overseas Chinese. William Tai (2013, 16) instead attempted to define Chinese capitalism in a 'neutral sense, shorn from the value judgements and ideological overtones' of the culturalist paradigm. However, Wu Xiao An (2014) argued that the term remains

⁴⁴ Chong Ee Phak, interview by author, Teluk Kumbar, July 15, 2020.

ambiguous, given the lack of distinction between Chinese capitalism and Chinese business in Tai's work.

Generally, the study of smallholder farmers in Malaysia is concentrated around the issue of poverty among the Malays (Ngah and Kamarudin 2019, 145). Research on smallholder Chinese farmers is few and far between and mostly done during the colonial period (see Jackson 1968; Lim 1971). There is research conducted on rural capitalists in Malaysia by Mario Rutten (2003, 97), but it was focused on large-scale Malay and Chinese farmers who own combine harvesters in the Muda Area as rice harvesting methods were being mechanised in the 1970s. The evident research gap on modern capitalistic smallholder Chinese farmers of recent years is possibly attributed to the notion that Chinese Malaysians are regarded as urban dwellers. This perception is rooted in the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), when rural Chinese experienced forced urbanisation by resettling in 'New Villages' (Nonini 2017, 36). According to Singh Sandhu (1964, 169), 'It is estimated that nearly 3/5 of the people relocated in the New Villages were agriculturists, many of them vegetable gardeners and livestock rearers. The movement of these people away from their livelihood, together with the poor siting of many of the New Villages in terms of agricultural potential, forced large numbers to change their occupations'.

How should these modern capitalistic smallholder Chinese farmers be conceptualised? The definition by Rigg, Salamanca and Thompson aligns well with the category of farmers I have interviewed as they differentiate it from peasants.⁴⁵ Their definition is as follows:

[S]mall farm and small farmer are different from the peasant cultivator in their deeper engagement with market relations, although this distinction is not always noted in the literature. Rather than harbouring the subsistence ethic of the peasant, they are entrepreneurial with a stronger profit motive. The nature of ownership and labour provision is not explicit; a small farm may be tenanted. (2016, 121)

⁴⁵ There are studies that conflates the definitions of peasants and smallholder farmers (see Lim 1971).

As previously mentioned, the Chinese farmers in Balik Pulau not only engage with the agriculture market but are also profit driven. Over time, as they have developed the durian industry in Balik Pulau, these farmers have evolved into entrepreneurs (see Chapter Three). These farmers frequently lease additional durian farms to increase income or sublet their own farms to other cultivators, especially as they age.⁴⁶ Another key characteristic of the smallholder farmers is that these farmers have ‘occupational diversity’, meaning their livelihoods are not only sustained by farming, but also non-farm work (Rigg, Salamanca, and Thompson 2016, 127). Among the farmers I interviewed, supplementary jobs ranged from mattress salesman, martial arts instructor, lorry driver, electrician, and cook. On average, the total size of their farms is 6 hectares.⁴⁷ According to the DOA (2022), the average Chinese durian farm in Balik Pulau is 2.7 hectares, and farms below 12 hectares are categorised as small farms.

Two possible frameworks that arguably apply to these durian farmers are Luis Llambi’s ‘petty capitalist production’ and ‘petty commodity production’. Petty capitalist production is defined as ‘all productive forms combining both owners and hired labour and sustaining a capital accumulation process’, and petty commodity production is ‘all productive forms largely based on the owner’s (family or individual) labour and sustaining a simple reproduction process’ (Llambi 1988, 353). Both definitions fill the gap of the varieties of farmers I have interviewed. The employment of hired labour varies and is contingent upon individual farmers’ circumstances. While petty commodity production might be perceived as having the nature of a peasant, Llambi asserts that both petty capitalist and commodity producers are ‘guided by some principles of maximisation if they wish to better their standard of living and avoid being evicted from the market’ (Llambi 1988, 354). Revisiting the outset

⁴⁶ Durian farmers would often use these two words in the Malay language and Mandarin respectively—*pajak* and *bang* 绑 to express that they lease their land for a period of time.

⁴⁷ Some farmers own more than one plot of land.

of this chapter, although these Balik Pulau Chinese farmers adopt a capitalistic approach, they differ substantially from mega durian plantations, which are also capitalist. Both groups practice productivist farming, so how are they different?

The disparities between these two groups are evident in the affordability and accessibility of resources available to generate high-yielding durian production. The background of mega durian plantation often involves diversification from established companies in sectors such as real estate development, construction, existing plantation agriculture (palm oil), manufacturing and bereavement care providers.⁴⁸ The care for the durian trees is also different. Large-scale plantations, encompassing up to tens of thousands of acres, necessitate the implementation of standardised procedures and technological interventions. In contrast, Balik Pulau farmers, operating on a far smaller scale, tend to individualise the care for each durian tree through meticulous observation and environmental scrutiny, akin to the nurturing attention one might give to a spouse. The initiation phase of durian farming between these two groups is different. Mega durian plantations typically clear large plots of land to plant durians, whereas smallholder durian farmers, constrained by limited resources, adopt a more incremental approach to new crop planting.

⁴⁸ Unpublished data collected for Dr Khoo Gaik Cheng's research titled 'Developing a Sustainable and Ecological Model for Durian as a Future Commercial Crop in Malaysia'.



Figure 5: A photo from Newleaf, a mega durian plantation at Kuala Lipis, Pahang⁴⁹

Source: Photograph taken from Newleaf's official website (<https://newleaf.com.my/malaysia-durian-plantation-farming-musang-king/>)

The preceding narrative about the farmers and the discourse surrounding their modern and capitalistic inclination seem to suggest that the farmers are obliged to 'follow the wind'. However, my interviews reveal that this concept serves as an opportunity for them to explore and extend their creative boundaries to meet market demands. When Wong Ze Kuan shared with me the various durian varieties Hakka farmers grafted, I asked him if he thought they were creative. He replied, 'No, they are forced by life, and only then creativity and changes come out from that.'⁵⁰ Chang Tuan Jin also shared a perspective that helped them to follow the wind, 'It is not how you adapt, but it is how you let go of something... If it does not work,

⁴⁹ The common narrative by durian farmers in Penang on durian farms and/or plantations in Pahang (especially Raub) is that they would 'other' them. A durian farmer said, 'Raub durians are very poisonous because they use a lot of pesticides. You can smell them.'

⁵⁰ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

you have to let go.’⁵¹ His son added, ‘When you let go of something, it also means you are insisting something else to happen.’⁵² In responding to life’s contingencies, people create culture (Bruner 1993, 326). Their creativity manifests as a form of improvisation, of making do with what they have. Improvisation and adaptation to diverse situations are evident in the farmers’ practices as they navigate their lives on the hills, especially before the 1980s (see Chapter Two). With the continual reimagination of their life, farmers in the late 1990s onwards started to find ways to promote Balik Pulau durians, leading them to become agropreneurs (see Chapter Three). The interaction between structure and agency, as outlined in practice theory, is clearly seen here.

These Balik Pulau Chinese farmers I have come to know are modern capitalistic smallholder farmers who possess a future-oriented temporality.⁵³ When the market fluctuates and the crop does not promise a bright future, they are more than willing to chop down and plant other crops (in today’s case, grafting on mature durian trees). While it is a waiting game, their eyes are set on the future, so they wait patiently, nurturing the trees like their own children. They are living for the future, believing in reaping the reward they diligently sow today. Being in a future-oriented temporality and living in an insecure environment drives them to take risks and experiment with what they have, such as breeding and grafting various durian varieties. The future-oriented temporality is linear as it encompasses the past, present, and future. The farmers stressed the importance of considering these three temporalities when making crucial decisions on the farm, and they aspired for continual improvement. In navigating these decisions, there are combinations of creativity and constraints in their everyday life. As Dove (2011, 225) writes, ‘Imagination played a direct and immediate role in the way smallholder production evolved’. For farmers to follow the wind is to adopt a

⁵¹ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

⁵² Chang Soi Loon, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

⁵³ The phrase ‘future-oriented temporalities’ is inspired by Lyons (2020, 42).

modernist imaginary. It is a product of modernity and capitalism, and their practices serve to maintain the system in which they are embedded.

Notably their modernist imaginary was not only for themselves but for the community, where they could offer something that they are proud of to the ‘outsiders’. Hence today, Balik Pulau durians have a place among other durians globally. Although farmers ‘follow the wind’, it is important to note that this does not automatically result in financial prosperity. Up until about a decade ago, these farmers commonly relied on multiple income streams, underscoring that farming alone was not a sufficient livelihood. ‘Following the wind’ serves as a guiding framework for the farmers to make crucial decisions for generations. It explains their pragmatic decisions of why they do it. It has two sides—an expression of being in accordance with what the market offers, and through those circumstances, we see farmers’ agency of creating something new which then reinforces the market again. Hence, ‘following the wind’ can also be seen using practice theory where both are structural and structuring. It is through this rationale, that the decisions that form their practices shift Hakka culture to what it is today as ‘culture is ordinary’ (see Chapter Two). While it is about profit, it is also about creating novelty in the process of adapting to their circumstances and protecting themselves. For these farmers, authenticity does not lie in the preservation of the past but in engaging authentically with present challenges and opportunities, always aimed at enhancing future outcomes.

Chapter 2: The Pioneers of the Balik Pulau Durian Industry

‘I (a Hakka farmer) think if our ancestors are Hokkien people, we will do the same thing also.’⁵⁴

‘If the Hakka people are not here, whoever is there will plant durian.’⁵⁵

In 2013, Dr Cheah Sian Kee, the deputy president of the Hakka Association Malaysia, announced a plan to build a Hakka village in Balik Pulau, featuring a three-story *tulou*⁵⁶ that has various amenities such as a Hakka resource centre, an art gallery, a hawker centre, a museum, and a durian farm (Yong 2013; Francis 2014). The project was scheduled for completion in 2019. When I visited the Malaysia Hakka Heritage Centre in Penang, the last section of the museum showcased a miniature model of the *tulou* covered by a glass box, and Miss Ooi, the museum guide, explained how this is an integral part of the Hakka people and culture. Interested to know more and keen to see the actual structure, I searched for it around Balik Pulau, but it was nowhere to be found.

As I continued to search, I was also questioning if the *tulou* had any real relevance to the Hakka community in Balik Pulau. Reaching an impasse, I turned to one of the Hakka farmers for help. Puzzled at first, he soon understood what I meant and replied, ‘That’s not Balik Pulau’s Hakka culture’. The farmer’s answer reflected that he did not identify with the Hakkas in China. He elaborated further, ‘*Tulou* is not in our local culture. It is Fujian Yongding culture. Why do you want to bring other cultures in?’ He shared that the *tulou* was proposed merely for commercialisation purposes but brings no cultural meaning to the locals in Balik Pulau. He sighed, ‘Sometimes, Hakka people don’t understand Hakka people.’ His

⁵⁴ Chang Soi Loon, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

⁵⁵ Tan Pak Sin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 21, 2021.

⁵⁶ A *tulou* is an earthen building with huge structures and they are famously known to be built in a circular shape located in Fujian Province, China (Leo 2015, 232).

comment insinuated a lack of comprehensive understanding among some Hakka association members regarding the distinct cultural nuances of the Hakkas in Balik Pulau.

Upon reflecting on the farmer's answers, I found myself asking: What constitutes Balik Pulau Hakka culture among these durian farmers? The Hakka educational elementary glossary discussed in the previous chapter presents the Hakka as hill-dwelling agriculturalists, detailing methods of durian tree planting that date back to the 1800s. In the same chapter, it was elucidated as an occupational continuity among the Hakkas; historically in China, they were found living in the highlands and practised farming as well. Additionally, in the introduction of this thesis, Kie Ngim Zui—a durian farmer who identifies as Hakka but is of Cantonese descent—pointed out that his durian farm is built upon the wisdom of Hakka culture. Since the majority of the durian farmers are Hakka in Balik Pulau, do they connect agriculture work, or more specifically durian cultivation, with their culture? What about non-Hakka durian farmers who also live in the vicinity and engage in similar agricultural practices? To echo Bruner (1993, 326), when examining culture, I should be asking, 'How is culture achieved, produced and made believable?'

To answer the question above, this chapter explores the Hakka Balik Pulau durian farmers' culture through Raymond Williams' notion of 'culture is ordinary'. Williams' definition of culture constitutes 'the whole way of life' which encompasses 'the common meanings' embedded in our everyday life (2014, 3). During my conversations with my interlocutors, they perceive their culture as something that is ordinary and practised on a daily basis. How they identify themselves as Hakka does not appear to differ substantially from that of non-Hakka Chinese farmers. As Chang Soi Loon articulated in the opening statement of this chapter when I asked him about the relationship between Hakka culture and cultivating durians, his perspective aligned with that of a Hokkien farmer who also affirmed a

similar rationale, ‘Teochew people also plant durian!’⁵⁷ Thus, it is through quotidian activities on the farm that these Hakka farmers come to define their sociocultural identities. This rationale could equally be extended to the farmers from other Chinese speech groups.

In learning about the Hakka durian farmers’ culture that is ordinary, this chapter analyses an oral history narrative of the durian farming practices from the 1950s to the 1970s, that is the genetic experimentation of durian. This group of Hakka farmers pioneered many durian varieties that are well-known today. In their everyday practices, ‘the known meaning and directions, which [durian farmers] are trained’ since young and ‘the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested’ by the farmers are apparent as they improvise creatively to cultivate and graft durian trees (Williams 2014, 3). A culture that is ordinary is thus both a repository of tradition and a crucible for creativity. Through the paradigm of ‘following the wind’, this chapter elucidates the methods and motivations that led these farmers to pioneer the genetic experimentation of durian. Furthermore, the chapter also delves into the routine daily interactions of these durian farmers as they negotiate and collaborate with peers, fishermen, and institutional bodies.

2.1 ‘Playing’ with Durian Seeds

In the 1950s, the Hakka farmers who resided on the hills were rather isolated. They shared that they hardly left Balik Pulau and travelling to the other side of Penang would take hours. When they were young, walking to school in Balik Pulau town from their house took almost an hour. The only accessible road transport to George Town from Balik Pulau was Federal Route 6, located on the north of the island that runs through the towns of Teluk Bahang, Batu Ferringhi and Tanjung Bungah and the south through Teluk Kumbar (refer to Figure 10). Back in the day, farmers did not have the means to own cars and therefore could

⁵⁷ Chang Boon Hao, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 25, 2021.

only travel by bus. Tregonning's observations echo this sentiment: 'Isolated by the mountains and rarely visited for twenty years, there was a patch of plain on the west coast as well, while scattered through the hills were isolated handkerchiefs of soil where a frugal Chinese could scratch a living, and where even today he can live undisturbed and unknown' (1966, 34). And yet, despite this sense of isolation, the farmers speak of interactions that extended beyond their immediate surroundings. Balik Pulau wasn't just a closed-off space; it also opened its arms to those from outside its borders.

'There was a group of Thai businessmen from Thailand, and they imported the first batch of Thai durians to Penang'.⁵⁸ Several farmers recounted that back then, Thai durians were the most luxurious and highly sought after durians, akin to Ochee (Black Thorn) today. The most coveted of all was called Ogao, which means Black Monkey.⁵⁹ This durian variety was the craze around the 1950s but has faded into obscurity since then. Ogao was a durian worth *durian jatuh*, *sarong jatuh*, and the Hakka farmers were part of this craze.⁶⁰ Ogao's allure lay in its durian flesh that was thick and meaty, weighing from two to four kilograms per durian. The price of Ogao costs around M\$10 to M\$30 per durian, while the local durian only costs M\$3 to M\$5 per durian, or cheaper (M\$ refers to Straits Malaya dollar).⁶¹ Thailand durians were the local favourite during that time because it was bigger and fleshier compared

⁵⁸ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

⁵⁹ There is a possibility that Ogao was already here before the 1950s and was planted by some farmers in Balik Pulau who could get hold of the Ogao scion wood or grafted seedling. Wong Ze Kuan said that it was likely plantation owners who planted it as they had connections with Thai businessmen. This possibility is referring to the similar morphology description of a registered durian on 27 May 1940 under the DOA, called D53 (unnamed) with farmers' description of Ogao. D53 characteristics are also similar with Jackie Chan's Wife (a durian cultivar mentioned later in this chapter). D53 was also registered under the address of Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau. Nonetheless, this could only be proven by carrying out a genetic characterisation of these durians.

⁶⁰ According to Wong (2013), *durian jatuh*, *sarong jatuh* is a 'Chinese saying that illustrates how fervent the Malays and Peranakans are in their durian eating. During the season, in order to get their hands on fruit they could not otherwise afford, some would sell their clothing.' In English, it can be directly translated as 'when the durian appears, off comes the sarong'.

⁶¹ The prices mentioned are based on my conversations with durian farmers. In most cases, farmers used the word 块 *kuai* to indicate money unit, but they did not specify Straits Malaya dollar or Ringgit Malaysia. Since this was referenced in the 1950s, the Straits Malaya dollar will be used. From 1906 to 1966, the exchange rate of one Straits Malayan/Malaysian dollar to the pound sterling is at 2 shillings 4 pence (Malayan \$50 = £7).

to local varieties that were smaller in size.⁶² The Hakka then decided to plant Ogao because of its exorbitant prices. Wong Ze Kuan pointed out, ‘Although a farmer may be very poor, he will buy the durian to plant the durian seed’.⁶³

Conversely, Chang Soi Loon shared a different view. The farmers were not merely planting durians for the money; they saw this as an opportunity to create and own something for their community as a form of security in an uncertain future.⁶⁴ As these farmers ‘followed the wind’, they learned to improvise with what they have on the farm. Chang Soi Loon said, ‘People here are very different. They do everything. They grow everything. They know [Thai durians] got good price, they grow that, but they also grow something new because they don’t know what will happen in the future’.⁶⁵ It is ‘the way farmers work’ as they have ‘to be open and responsive to continually changing environmental conditions’ (Hallam and Ingold 2008, 12). While they are open, they are also wise to be a step ahead, to be in a state of *juansiwei* 居安思危 (being prepared for adversity even in times of peace), said Wong Ze Kuan.⁶⁶ They prepare for adversity by methods that are not necessarily ‘by the book’, but rather through their collective experience and tacit knowledge as farmers. This was evident when they encountered depreciations in latex, nutmeg and clove prices and subsequently made the decision to start cultivating durian. Their future-oriented temporality mindset is beyond monetary concerns as it involves the assurance of the family and community’s well-being.

⁶² According to Bhusiri and Vangnai, ‘native durian cultivars came to Thailand from Malaysia in 1787’ (quoted in Somsri 2018, 9) through the southern part of Thailand. The durian has travelled back and forth between two nations, shaped by the land and well loved by both.

⁶³ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

⁶⁴ According to Yen (2008, 379), the Hakkas possess a minority psychology which is characterised by a sense of insecurity and fear, and although it is diminished in Southeast Asia as there is a blurring of Chinese speech group differences, the Hakkas still felt at a disadvantage. While it is acknowledged that the Hakkas are a minority on Penang Island, and that they may have this insecurity, this fear appears to be shared by other non-Hakka farmers in Balik Pulau. Therefore, this sense of insecurity and fear seems more closely associated with the nature of the vocation rather than ethnicity.

⁶⁵ Chang Soi Loon, interview by author, Balik Pulau, July 16, 2020.

⁶⁶ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

These farmers who initiated planting durians are seen as *you yanguang* 有眼光 (visionaries) because of their courage.

When farmers started planting Ogao durian seeds or any durian seeds that were deemed promising, they were inadvertently practising natural breeding.

‘In the beginning, when farmers wanted to plant durians that they found tasty, they kept the seeds carefully. After that, they will remark: what is the colour of the flesh and try to describe the taste. After seven to eight years, when it fruits, farmers question, why doesn’t it taste the same as the previous one?’⁶⁷

Without a formal education in agriculture, farmers were unaware that planting durian seeds from a specific variety will not yield the same durian variety, a concept known as open pollination cultivar. Nevertheless, this genetic experimentation was a crucial process because it encouraged the farmers to explore and discover more about cultivating durians. It is a ‘generative’ improvisation as farmers used words such as *yanjiu* 研究 and *mosuo* 摸索 to indicate that their practices include a careful study of cultivating durians through observation and being hands-on. Farmers would mimic each other when it came to planting durian, but mere replication of the process was not enough. There are many components that play a role in successful farming; from the quality of the seed to the health of the soil. Hence, their careful study ‘entails a complex and ongoing alignment of observation’ of the durian plant and its environment (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 5)

The farmers’ curiosity led them to cultivate a great variety of *durian kampung*, which are the second generation offspring of the original ‘mother’ durian.⁶⁸ The farmers call them *qinqi* 亲戚 (relatives). These durian kampung are named in a variety of ways: based on the

⁶⁷ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

⁶⁸ *Durian kampung* (formal: *durian saka*) is a term in Bahasa Malaysia and is more commonly used among Malaysians. It is a non-pedigree durian—a durian that is not grafted, unbranded and not registered under the DOA (DOA Muar 2019; Lo 2020). Hence, in a cluster of *durian kampung*, there is no standard in taste, texture and flavour. The majority of durians start out as *durian kampung* but once they are grafted, they are known as *durian klon* or *durian kahwin*, meaning grafted durians. Some of these grafted durians are registered and some are not, but they fetch a higher price than *durian kampung* (see DOA 2018). From 2020 onwards, the DOA coined the term *durian kampung premium* to fetch higher prices (Awang 2020; DOA Pahang 2020).

unique characteristics of the fruit, the person who discovered or cultivated it, or even the location where it was found. The relative of Ogao is suspected to be Jackie Chan's Wife (also known as Lin Feng Jiao). The story behind the name is that Jackie Chan's wife, Lin Feng Jiao, shares the same name with Song Wah Sin's wife, who is the founder of this durian variety (Gasik 2018, 185). Since he named it after his wife, a more accurate name for this durian would be Song Wah Sin's Wife. Comparing Ogao and Jackie Chan's Wife, the latter durian is richer in flavour and has a better fruit set.⁶⁹

Another Thai durian that entered the local scene was Chanee, which has two relatives: D15 and Green Skin 15. As these durians are possibly related to one another, they are also closely associated with the person who founded and registered them with the DOA. D15 is often called Chanee because of its striking resemblance to the original, although it is not definitively confirmed to be Chanee. Therefore, D15 and Chanee are frequently used interchangeably. In the registration books, D15 goes by D177, while Chanee is D123.⁷⁰ Green Skin 15's mother tree might be Chanee and/or D15; hence it bears the number fifteen in its name. In recent years, it has also earned another moniker, Green Dragon. Lee Toh Sem, who registered Green Skin 15, shared that it was founded by Yong Jing San, his cousin in law in Wong Wa Wa's orchard. Wong Wa Wa is Lee Toh Sem's maternal uncle, making Yong Jing San his son-in-law. Yong Jing San owns an orchard in Thailand and due to his connections there, he was able to easily bring Thai durian saplings to Balik Pulau. Since D15 was well-loved by Yong Jing San, he went on to plant its seeds along the road between Sungai Pinang and Teluk Bahang. One of these trees bore a durian with dark green thorns with pale yellow flesh. When Lee Toh Sem tried it at Wong Wa Wa's farm, which is not too far from his own, he immediately fell in love with it and planted it on his farm. Once his

⁶⁹ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

⁷⁰ Although all registered durians start with the letter D, there are some unregistered variety names that has the D code in front e.g. D15 given by local durian farmers.

Green Skin 15 matured, Lee Toh Sem entered it in a durian competition in 1987 and registered this variety.

While the founding story of Green Skin 15 by Lee Toh Sem showed intentionality in planting the durian, the one recorded by Lindsay Gasik, a durian connoisseur who wrote the book—*The Durian Tourist's Guide to Penang*, showed creative improvisation through accident. According to Gasik (2018, 161), the variety accidentally grew on Kuan Yee Yin's durian farm, which mostly focused on D15. Green Skin 15 is harvested in the late middle season. When the durian season was about to end, there was a feast in his orchard to celebrate a good harvest, and durian seeds were scattered everywhere. One of these D15 seeds germinated to become the Green Skin 15 we know today. The only similarity between this story and the former is that both were planted around the same area, and that the mother tree has died. Today, the oldest Green Skin 15 tree can be found in Titi Serong, where it was planted by Ah Mau. Titi Serong is notably home to some of the oldest Green Skin 15 trees.

Farmers were diligent in planting durian seeds all over their farms, sometimes by accident. Wong Ze Kuan chimed, saying, 'It was as though they were having fun!'⁷¹ As young adults with ample free time on the farm, Kie Ngim Zui reminisces that they 'played' with the durian seeds and saplings individually, with family members or friends.⁷² Play or *wan* 玩 as the farmers would say, encapsulates the sense of curiosity and experimentation as they tried out different planting methods or even grafting techniques. This was not just individual tinkering but a communal endeavour, demonstrating the 'relational' improvising process. As Airriess (2020a, 11) pointed out, 'Hakka settlements in Balik Pulau have much to do with the early growth of numerous grafted durian cultivars that in part was promoted by a sense of community'. Once the durians are harvested, farmers would convene to evaluate the

⁷¹ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

⁷² Kie Ngim Zui, interview by author, Balik Pulau, July 17, 2020.

durians and discuss their flavour and texture. Conversations like, ‘How's your second-gen Chanee coming along?’ or ‘Wow, this one's even better than Chanee!’ were common as they helped one another fine-tune their cultivation methods. Learning how to cultivate durian trees as a community is a form of knowledge construction shared and archived among these farmers. Durian farmers in Balik Pulau ‘undergo histories of development and maturation within fields of relationships established through the presence and activities of others’ (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 8).

In addition to their foreign relatives, Thai varieties, local durians like Ang Hae and Khun Poh have seed-based origins that birthed a variety of durians. The result of creating a myriad of durian clones was not their goal; ‘it is in fact seldom that human groups who produce diversity do it for the sake of producing diversity’ (Mariani 2018, 27). What was worthwhile for these farmers was to ‘play’, and in doing so, they found ‘satisfaction in a taste, their needs, sociabilities, ideas, or even simply curiosity’ (27). Harry Liau who grew up in Pondok Upeh recalled a story told by his father that his neighbour had harvested a good durian and his father went ahead and bought a durian from them to plant the seeds.⁷³ The durian had eight seeds and they were all planted, producing eight durian trees. He was unsure of its origins, but speculated that it could be the iconic Ang Hae, also known as Red Prawn, native to Pondok Upeh. This centenarian tree belonged to Lee Teck Hin’s family, and he discovered it when he was a teenager (Gasik 2018, 125). The name of this durian was most probably influenced by the freshwater shrimp farming industry in Balik Pulau that emerged in the 1960s. As for Khun Poh, it was founded by Liew Khun Poh when he purchased a piece of land in 1957 that is home to this centenarian durian tree in Sungai Pinang (Gasik 2020, 137). Given the durian’s exceptional quality, it’s no surprise farmers started planting the seed

⁷³ Harry Liau, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

all over their farms, creating an extensive family of Khun Poh durians. Khun Poh's relatives include 600, 604, 700, Ang Bak Kia, Ang Jin, Lan Jiao Yuan, Little Red, and Zhu Chun.

None of these durians are registered under the DOA except 604 by Lee Toh Sem. The founders of 604 are Chang Gui Feng and Chang Yong Hua.⁷⁴ They are brothers and are Lee Toh Sem's maternal uncles. The 604 durians were named after the location of the durian planted, which is the sixth tree on the fourth terrace on the hillside of Sungai Pinang (Gasik 2018, 141). Hillside terracing, a notable feature in Balik Pulau farms, will be discussed later in this chapter. The Chang brothers noticed that the 604 durians ripened the earliest and introduced it to Lee Toh Sem, who started cultivating it in 1964. Early-season durians often fetch higher prices due to their scarcity. The 600 durian was planted by Liew Khun Poh's son, Liew Kee Siong, in the 1980s but only lived for about 10 years (Gasik 2018, 199). Liew Yu Chai (Liew Khun Poh's grandchild) planted Little Red near the stream on his family's farm when he was only 20 years old. The mother tree of Little Red is still thriving on the family's property, now over 50 years old (Gasik 2018, 195).

As of the 1990s, ten durians from Balik Pulau have been officially registered out of a total of 13 durians in Penang (DOA n.d.). Many unregistered durians in Penang are also well-known among durian eaters. Lindsay Gasik recorded 17 such unregistered Penang durians in her book, whilst observing that durian varieties in Penang are a dime a dozen (Gasik 2018, 204). The number of unregistered durians remains elusive due to the absence of a centralised, comprehensive list. Nonetheless, they are scattered around the Internet in personal blogs and websites. As Gasik notes, 'Every farm has its speciality *kampung* variety, which is a random tree, planted from seed, that they thought was good enough to give a name. If it is really good, the neighbours will want it and then you have a minor but fairly widespread variety'

⁷⁴ Lindsay Gasik book records Chang Hui Huang as the founder of 604. There is a disparity in name and number of founders but the other details of 604 matches each other.

(2018, 204). For example, Chang Boon Hao was especially proud of his Honey durian trees, a point in which he repeatedly mentioned as we toured his farm.⁷⁵ He discovered this durian variety, of which only three trees exist, and its flavour is as sweet as its name suggests.

2.2 Grafting Durians

As farmers gradually discovered more about the durians they were cultivating, they also began to explore how to reproduce the specific variety they enjoyed. Applying practice theory, they eventually learned how to graft durian trees through individual and communal experimentation and by being inspired by their surroundings. Wong Ze Kuan recalled a story from his mother, stating that durian grafting was already practised earlier in the 1940s during the Second World War by a farmer named Ling Han Rong, hailing from Sungai Pinang.⁷⁶ Grafting practices were not widespread at the time. Lee Toh Sem, an 80-year-old farmer from Sungai Pinang, shared that when he was young, he heard that there were three farmers, Lim Sit and the Chang brothers, who jointly learned how to graft Khun Poh's durian sapling successfully. They taught him how to graft durians. Several methods were used, such as the approach grafting method, which proved to be inefficient. The marcotting propagation method was also experimented with but failed to gain popularity among farmers due to its inability to produce a good rooting system.

Grafting was not an easy skill to master, requiring farmers to invest time in honing the right techniques. While many farmers had a general understanding of grafting methods, only a select few were adept at it. They are usually hired to graft for other farmers to increase the grafting success rate. Some even established nurseries to sell durian saplings. In the 1980s, Penang became famous for producing good quality durian saplings. Na Kim Hin, a fertiliser

⁷⁵ Chang Boon Hao, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 28, 2021.

⁷⁶ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

seller in Penang remembered that there were many farmers from Pahang and Johor who would visit Penang's durian farms to purchase a great number of durian saplings, especially Ang Hae.⁷⁷ Gasik noted in her book that the technology of grafting durian trees only gained popularity in the 1960s (Gasik 2018, 95), while Airriess (2020a, 8) argued that the 1970s was the beginning of grafting practices by orchard owners. Based on my interviews, the origin of the year durian grafting was discovered is difficult to pinpoint; however, it is safe to say that the practice emerged around the 1950s and gained popularity throughout the years. The epistemic origin of grafting is also difficult to determine, but two common narratives were often shared by farmers. The first one is that they were inspired by the bud-grafting of rubber trees and the second points to influences from the Thai durian industry.

During the colonial period, the Rubber Research Institute of Malaya (RRIM) was established.⁷⁸ The grafting of rubber trees using the bud-grafting method was already in place in the 1920s but remained a controversy as some preferred planting from high-yielding seed (Lewis and Holt 1935, 26). Hence, it was a norm for rubber plantations and smallholdings to cultivate rubber seedlings from rubber seeds, especially seeds obtained from established experimental gardens at RRIM (Shamsul and Ong 2020, 36). In the 1950s, the bud-grafting technique was used on a large scale after being tested over the years. Other propagation techniques were tested but bud-grafting showed the most promising results (Garner 1960, 2).

The widespread bud-grafting techniques of rubber trees led farmers to speculate that similar methods could potentially be applied to durian trees. Wong Ze Kuan recalled a story told by the elders that they were surprised when they learned from RRIM that rubber trees could be grafted.⁷⁹ The transfer of knowledge from grafting rubber trees was quickly applied

⁷⁷ Na Kim Hin, video call interview by author, July 28, 2021. Unfortunately, these farmers from Pahang and Johor only met with disappointment when they harvested their Ang Hae durians. The terroir of the durian farms are different in both locations. Ang Hae in Johor has green thorns, taste sweeter and its flesh is bright yellow, while in Penang, it has grey-brown thorns and the flesh is of a pearly grey-pink sheen (Gasik 2018, 100).

⁷⁸ Today it is called the Rubber Institute of Malaysia, an agency under the Malaysian Rubber Board.

⁷⁹ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 7, 2021.

to durian trees. The bud-grafting method took place and farmers started grafting their durian seedlings with their preferred durian cultivars. In their attempts to graft, there was relational improvisation among farmers as they *hu xiang jiaoliu* 互相交—interacted with one another, said Lee Chau Yun.⁸⁰ Based on Airriess' (2020a, 11) account of his research, 'According to the best known orchard owner who lives in Sungai Pinang, Hakka farmers would periodically meet at small Sungai Pinang market and exchange grafting knowledge and young cultivars'.

Nevertheless, even with a model of reference in place, bud-grafting remained tricky. In their approach to grafting, farmers made the most of the multiple possibilities of grafting attempts and took various factors into consideration—the condition of the seedling or mature durian tree, the weather, and the scion. The failing rate of grafting durians was high, but each attempt served as a learning experience for the farmers. They improvised generatively as their workmanship of grafting is practised repeatedly, finding predictability in their environment and the rhythm of grafting new durian trees. Presently, farmers are acutely cognisant of the preparatory steps required prior to grafting. These include ensuring that mature durian trees are adequately fertilised, that surrounding weeds are eradicated, and that potential pests are adequately managed.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the aforementioned preparatory steps were not part of the procedure, and no fertilisers were specially formulated for durian trees. Therefore, durian farmers had to experiment and explore various fertiliser options available on their farms (this is analysed in the next section). Seasonal considerations also played a role in the grafting of durian saplings. Ah Chan, an 80-year-old durian farmer, shared that the durian saplings should only be grafted and planted during the winter solstice that falls at the end of the year, between November and December.⁸¹ Since it is the rainy season, grafted durian saplings can

⁸⁰ Lee Chau Yun, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 20, 2021.

⁸¹ Ah Chan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, June 8, 2021.

be kept moist. These saplings are highly delicate, necessitating high water content while also being sensitive to light exposure. Unfortunately, due to climate change, Ah Chan said that the weather today is unpredictable, rendering it difficult to care for the durian saplings, including the mature durian trees.

The grafting process also requires a degree of aftercare, thereby illustrating that the knowledge construction associated with grafting durian trees was a gradual process of experimentation. It was not a skill necessarily taught generationally—passed down from father or grandfather to son—but rather among those who were interested in durian grafting. Each time they graft, the improvisation is ‘temporal’. The action of repeating the grafting method is not perfect each time, and ‘it is precisely because of imperfection in the system call for continual correction that all repetition involves improvisation’ (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 10). Harry Liau shared that his father heard about the possibility of bud-grafting and attempted it multiple times but failed. ‘You must have the *muk* (eye)’, he explained in Hakka.⁸² The eye refers to an axillary bud on a scion. Harry Liau assumed it was the same as rambutan, whereby it did not need to be in a vegetative cycle. So, Harry Liau and his father learned it through observation and listening to their friends’ discussions. Sometimes, the discussion can get heated as farmers assert that their proven method is better than others. Lee Teck Hin learned how to graft durians from a friend and practised it. He eventually opened a small nursery selling mainly Ang Hae saplings (Gasik 2020).

Besides the RRIM and Thai durian industry, one farmer, Benny Wong gave credit to the Penang DOA who helped his father with initiating his durian cultivation journey.⁸³ Benny Wong's father was a public servant who worked for the Keretapi Tanah Melayu Berhad (KTMB) as a railway checker in Pahang for ten years. He grew up in Balik Pulau but took

⁸² Harry Liau, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

⁸³ Benny Wong, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 25, 2021.

this job opportunity as it could pay better than tapping rubber and planting coconut trees. When he retired, he started planting durians in the 1970s. Instead of planting his durians from seeds, the Penang DOA provided him with grafted seedlings such as D2, D24, Chanee and Ganja. Benny Wong shared that these varieties did not produce good durians. Another farmer, Harry Liau was also aware that DOA provided grafted seedlings, but he was not sure if the quality was assured.⁸⁴ Most farmers I interviewed preferred to buy a grafted sapling from a trusted friend or nursery or graft it themselves. When Benny Wong took over the farm, he grafted most of the durian trees to Musang King in the early 1990s. The government provided a subsidy of RM200 to graft each mature durian tree. While most farmers were willing to chop down trees which did not benefit them much, Benny Wong kept his Ganja tree for sentimental reasons.

The breeding of varietal heterogeneous durians and grafting them were initiated by these Hakka farmers. Their creativity, improvisation and adaptability to their surroundings led them to kickstart the durian industry in Balik Pulau. Although at this stage I do not label the farmers as entrepreneurs until the emergence of durio-tourism in Chapter Three, they do carry characteristics of being entrepreneurial. These farmers are known to be risk takers and innovators in the community, consistent with what Smart and Smart characterise as Schumpeterian (Smart and Smart 2005, 10). Smart and Smart characterise two types of entrepreneurs that have opposing styles: Schumpeterian and Kirznerian. The Schumpeterian is a creative and innovative entrepreneur who disrupts or shocks the industry by developing new products. On the other hand, the Kirznerian is adaptive, imitative and adopts the technology by capitalizing on readily available knowledge (Smart and Smart 2005, 10).

An example of the Schumpeterian durian farmers would be the Chang brothers, whom Lee Toh Sem refers to as highly respected seniors. Their innovation disrupted the industry and

⁸⁴ Harry Liau, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

they encountered initial scepticism and adversity. Upon successfully grafting durians, the brothers spread the word around the community, claiming that durians would be the next big thing. However, their claims were met with derision, people dismissed them and said they were all talk no action.

But by the late 1970s and 1980s, most of the farmers came to realise this was the ‘wind’ that they should follow and started planting clonal durians on a larger scale, incrementally replacing their rubber and spice trees. Most of the farmers I interviewed fall into the category of followers, also known as Kirznerian entrepreneurs who adapt and adopt technology and products (Smart and Smart 2005, 10). The *Penang Island Structure Plan: Technical Report Series on Agriculture* published in 1984 reported a trend of replanting rubber land with other crops such as durian since the 1950s (Kam 1984, 6, 29). Although other assorted fruit trees were also planted by farmers, of the total of 1,450 hectares estimated to be fruit trees, almost half are durian trees (Kam 1984, 37).

2.3 Using Traditional Fertilisers and Planting Methods

As mentioned earlier, the durian farmers had to experiment with fertilising their durian saplings and trees. This is because ready-made durian fertilisers were not readily available in the market until the 1980s.⁸⁵ When I asked durian farmers about fertilising methods before they were introduced to chemical fertilisers, most of them would usually answer simplistically, ‘Where got durian fertiliser?’⁸⁶ Harry Lian continued to add, ‘If you fertilise your durian tree, people will laugh at you!’⁸⁷ This sentiment was largely shaped by

⁸⁵ Most of the durian farmers mentioned that they were only introduced to ‘durian fertilisers’ by agrochemical companies in the 1980s.

⁸⁶ I understand this sentence is grammatically incorrect, but it is written in this manner to retain the colloquial local flavour of their answer. Both Mandarin and English-speaking durian farmers conveyed this. In Mandarin, it would be ‘*nali you feiliao* 哪里有肥料?’ Grammatically, it would be written and implied as ‘No durian fertilisers were used’.

⁸⁷ Harry Lian, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

the economic logic of the time, which dictated that only crops with a demonstrable return on investment merited the application of fertilizers. Before the 1970s, durian was still an experimental crop. The durian farmers' perception of fertiliser was that it came in bags packaged by agrochemical companies, but when prompted further, the farmers started to recollect their memories of traditional fertilisers used on the farm, especially the smell of it. Admittedly, Wong Ze Kuan said that fertilising durians was an uncommon practice but *durian kampung* that bore good fruit was fertilised sporadically.⁸⁸

When I asked Ah Chan, about old ways of fertilising, he was quick to reply that chicken manure was used to fertilise his durian saplings, and he used it to fertilise his durian trees until they were five years old to encourage and induce flowering at a young age.⁸⁹ Perhaps this method was not mentioned by other farmers because it was a challenging fertilising medium to use, as Ah Chan cautioned me that only a small amount of chicken manure should be applied. While there seems to be a lack of standardised measurement for what he deems as a 'small amount,' he warned me that applying generously and too close in proximity to the durian plant would cause the saplings and even mature durian trees to be dried out, stunted or in the worst-case scenario, to die. He reasoned, 'The chicken manure is salty and hot'.⁹⁰ So, if a generous amount were applied near the durian tree, it would be 'feverish', rendering it vulnerable to disease or even causing its demise. Ah Chan and his friends experimented with this fertilising medium, and it was a learning curve because it did not yield consistent results for the durian tree to flourish as it should. Today, chloride-based fertilisers are not encouraged because they are known to draw out water from the tree.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau May 7, 2021.

⁸⁹ Ah Chan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, June 6, 2021.

⁹⁰ Characteristics of chicken manure as salty and hot given by Ah Chan is to indicate that it is high in sodium and nitrogen nutrient content.

⁹¹ Yong Chong Yip, interview by Khoo Gaik Cheng and author, Subang Jaya, April 21, 2022.

What other fertilising mediums did these farmers experiment with and use during this time? As farmers looked back on their lives on the farm, they chuckled and paused briefly, perhaps thinking about how they could share this appropriately—‘We used our excrement as fertilisers’, Wong Ze Kuan disclosed, and his answer echoed the other farmers as well.⁹² The farmers maximized the utility of available resources on the farm for various agricultural practices, including fertilisation. Wong Ze Kuan explained, ‘When we urinate, we will transfer it to a container. Food waste such as vegetables, fish innards or other seafood waste is also thrown into the same container’. This container is left to ferment with time, they are turned into fertilisers and used on various crops on their farm. On the other hand, Robert Lee shared that his family would dig holes on their farm to bury their excrement and cover them with soil.⁹³ Furthermore, they would burn leaves, grass, and branches to produce fertilisers. These farmers improvised with the way they worked and had a constant interaction with the resources present around them in processing fertilisers.

Another fertiliser repeatedly mentioned when they relive their memories is *xia kang* 虾糠, and their first response would typically be, ‘It was unbelievably stinky!’ *Xia kang* is a type of fertiliser made by fishermen around Balik Pulau. Before processing, fishermen collect unsold crustacean seafood, such as prawns, shrimps, and crabs. Sometimes, fish are also included. *Xia kang* is cooked in a big pot with salt and then dried under the sun. Once they are fully dried, they are sold to farmers. This fertiliser was mainly used to fertilise clove and nutmeg trees, and farmers would apply them around the spice trees.⁹⁴ The putrid

⁹² Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau May 7, 2021.

⁹³ Robert Lee, interview by author, Balik Pulau October 20, 2021.

⁹⁴ This was also suggested by the Penang DOA (1989) in their book titled *Ringkasan Maklumat Tanaman* (Plant Information Summary) that cloves and nutmeg trees are required to be fertilised with *serbuk udang* (shrimp powder). Although *xia kang* and shrimp powder might be in a different medium, but the main content, chitin is present in that fertiliser.

smell of the *xia kang* becomes evident when it rains, but this is also when the nutrients of *xia kang* is absorbed into the soil.

While initially intended for spice trees, Tan Pak Sin recalled that *xia kang* was also used to fertilise durian trees on his farm. He argued that trees treated with it will taste extremely good due to their high amino acid content.⁹⁵ Wong Ze Kuan remembered his journey of buying *xia kang* with his grandfather and he learned how to identify well-made *xia kang*, because some sellers would add additional seashells or sand to the bag of fertiliser.⁹⁶ Lee Chau Yun stressed that it was not easy to obtain *xia kang* as it involved long journeys on foot to the coastline followed by the strenuous task of transporting large bags of the fertiliser back to the farm.⁹⁷ Therefore, *xia kang* was used sparingly on the farm. Though fertilization was not a focal point in their genetic experimentation with durian cultivation, it did demonstrate the adaptive and improvisational practices common among Hakka farmers.

Between the 1950s to 1970s, the types of fertilisers produced and used by farmers are done in an organic manner, utilising the materials around their environment, including buying from fishermen. Not all fertilizing methods worked in their favour but in figuring out suitable application and materials, they demonstrated temporal improvisation. Their fertilising knowledge is guided by the past, from family members and friends, but it continues to evolve as they gather new experience and knowledge. Today, almost all durian farmers remarked that *xia kang* has become obsolete due to the high cost of seafood. Instead of whole prawns or shrimps, only their shells are used as fertilisers, known as *xia ke* 虾壳 or farmers would buy ready-made ones, called chitin from agrochemical shops. This narrative underscores the continued prevalence of traditional fertilization methods that are not ‘replicat[ed] with a fixed

⁹⁵ Tan Pak Sin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 21, 2021.

⁹⁶ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau May 7, 2021.

⁹⁷ Lee Chau Yun, interview by author, Balik Pulau October 20, 2021.

pattern' but are largely 'carr[ied] on' from Hakka durian farmers as part of their quotidian practices (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 7).



Figure 6: An eroding stone wall at Chong Chok Yin's durian farm

Source: Photographed by the author



Figure 7: An intact stone wall at Harry Liau's durian farm

Source: Photographed by the author

Since the cultivation of durians was largely experimental, these farmers opted to plant durians in areas not already occupied by other cash crops, such as rubber or spice trees. These areas are mostly uneven and filled with rocks. This practice was also taught in the Balik Pulau Hakka educational elementary glossary shown in Chapter One, written in the 1800s—*liu lian san zu set ti gong*. Written in Hakka, it means durian and mangosteen seeds are forcefully inserted on rocky grounds. When Harry Liau started dabbling in durian cultivation, he was similarly instructed the same methods by old, seasoned durian farmers, albeit for

different reasons. These farmers claimed that the tree buds would be more resilient during dry spells when planted on less fertile, rocky ground. This is because ‘the rocks release *ngiau* (urine in Hakka),’ Harry Liau explained. Perplexed, I wondered how it worked, and Harry responded with an analogy, ‘Like humans, we release urine, the rock also releases urine which cools down the roots of the durian trees. When it rains, the rocks keep some water in them’.⁹⁸ A book published by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development Malaysia in 1976 noted that ‘durian seem to do better in the less fertile upland soils’ (Kanapathy 1976).

Not all farmers practised this, as 604 was planted on a terraced area held by stone walls. The stone walls were painstakingly built by Chinese coolies during colonial times to prevent soil erosion. Chong Chok Yin, pointing to the eroding stone wall on his farm, explained that there was no cement holding it, ‘slab by slab, piece by piece, they stacked it up’.⁹⁹ Originally designed for the cultivation of cloves and nutmeg, and subsequently rubber trees, these terraced areas are rich in soil—a crucial factor especially for the cultivation of finicky clove trees, which require flat land for the ladder-assisted harvesting process. Lim Chin Khee, a well-known durian expert who has visited all kinds of durian farms around Malaysia, mentioned that the stone wall in Balik Pulau is a traditional method in agriculture and one of a kind in Malaysia (Lim 2021).

The quotidian routines of these Hakka farmers from the 1950s to the 1970s shaped their culture as locals living in Balik Pulau. Employing traditional methods handed down within their community—acquired through observation, exchange of dialogue, and individual improvisation—they perpetuated and enhanced their agricultural practices. Given that these practices as Hakka durian farmers are deeply embedded in their daily life, how did they see these ordinary everyday practices as defining their socio-cultural identities?

⁹⁸ Harry Liau, interview by author, Balik Pulau, May 9, 2021.

⁹⁹ Chong Chok Yin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, June 8, 2021.

2.4 *The Assimilation and Integration of Chinese Durian Farmers*

Historically, the Hakkas have been characterised as ‘poor and hardworking farmers’, a perception that has contributed to their identity (Constable 1996, 22). In the 1990s, Hakkas were still well represented in agriculture (Constable 1996, 23). Based on earlier accounts of these Hakka farmers’ forefathers, they left China as farmers and continued to farm in Balik Pulau, and they were most likely found farming on the hilly slopes as well. While they might not be farming the same crop, Lee Chau Yun mentioned that his father applied what he learned as a farmer in China to the new environment he was in, planting mainly spice trees.¹⁰⁰ In the 1920s to 1930s, there were also records from the *Reports on the Census of British Malaya* that Hakka were planter of cloves, nutmegs and rubber in Balik Pulau and Bukit Mertajam (Mak 1995, 66).

There exists a form of occupational continuity among these Hakka farmers; however, when questioned about their occupational affinity—which probes into their socio-cultural identity as Hakkas with a focus on farming—many were ‘disturbed’ (Garfinkel 1964).¹⁰¹ The Hakka socio-cultural identity is not something they consider daily. It is rather common for Hakka communities to find this question challenging because, ‘the complexity of being Hakka grows with every generation’ (Leo 2015, 205). They pondered on the question and found the relationship between their agricultural work and being Hakka vague and uncertain, particularly in the context of durian cultivation. These Balik Pulau Hakka farmers perceived

¹⁰⁰ Lee Chau Yun, interview by author, Balik Pulau October 20, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Although there is an occupational continuity for Hakka Balik Pulau farmers, this is not the case for many migrants from China because ‘certain occupational activities were not traceable’ and many of the migrants were contract labourers whose ‘occupational fate was entirely in the hands of recruiters and later employers’ (Mak 1993, 20). In questioning them about their Hakka socio-cultural identity and farming, I understand that I might be narrowing occupational affinity down to a ‘one dialect group one occupation’ (Mak 1995, 78), which is unhelpful because Hakkas are also involved in other occupations, as mentioned in Chapter One. Hence, I factored Balik Pulau in following Mak (1995, 78), who strongly suggested occupational affinity to include the element of location. Historical documents, literature, and Hakka durian farmers’ oral history in Balik Pulau shown in Chapters One and Two showcased a close relationship between their Hakka identity and farming. Probing this question brings forth the complexity of the everchanging Balik Pulau Hakka farmers’ socio-cultural identity, making sense of the shift in Hakka culture and identity, similarities, apparent discontinuities, and divergences (Constable 1996, 6).

their farm work as a means to pay for their livelihoods, and that their jobs could equally be pursued by other Chinese speech groups.¹⁰² This means Hakka farmers in Balik Pulau today, find little to no occupational affinity with farming, albeit the presence of occupational continuity.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, pivotal political shifts occurred in mainland China, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At the same time, Malaya was working towards gaining independence from Britain.¹⁰³ These changes generated palpable tension among Chinese residents in Malaya as they were 'forced to choose a more final way than ever before between returning to the newly established communist mainland or remaining on a more permanent basis as citizens' of Malaysia (Carstens 1988, 75).¹⁰⁴ Those who chose to remain here were encouraged to build their own cultural identity as Chinese Malaysians, localising their Chineseness. Between the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese culture in Malaysia was generally supported by various Chinese-based institutions; many continued to speak various Chinese languages, such as Hakka or Hokkien, among themselves (Carstens 2003, 326). The socio-political landscape played a role in informing the identity of the close-knit community of the Hakka farmers who have remained in Balik Pulau. Their identity is expressed through their everyday life, notably in their cultivation of durian varieties. Consequently, a nuanced Chinese Malaysian identity is gradually constructed, representing 'a

¹⁰² When I asked the farmers about their interest and passion in farming, some agreed that this work requires passion but others said, '*weile yao chifan* 为了要吃饭!' which means, for survival's sake.

¹⁰³ Malaya was declared independent in 1957, forming The Federation of Malaya. Then in 1963, Malaysia was formed consisting of Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo and Sarawak.

¹⁰⁴ A farmer shared with me that during this period, some of his family members decided to go back to China. It was a topic discussed discreetly, given its sensitive nature related to differing political views.

combination of traditional Chinese and modern cultural features of Malaysian origin' (Tan 2000, 65).¹⁰⁵

What about non-Hakka farmers who also farmed in Balik Pulau during this period of time? These farmers that I have spoken to and their families entered the agricultural scene later compared to the Hakka farmers who have been farming since the mid 1800s. They had decided to enter the industry for socio-economic purposes. Chang Boon Hao's family, of Hokkien descent, was involved in the nutmeg business and his father operated a nutmeg processing factory in Balik Pulau.¹⁰⁶ In the 1970s, they expanded into cultivating spice plants and eventually durian trees on a newly acquired plot of land. Given Chang Boon Hao's interest in farming, his father allotted him the farm while his brother took over the factory. Rachel Ooi's father-in-law, a Taishanese coffee shop owner in Balik Pulau town, was inspired to try his hand at durian cultivation by his primarily Hakka clientele. He bought a plot of land within walking distance from his coffee shop along Jalan Bukit Penara.

Furthermore, Tan Cheng Hor's grandfather, a Foochow and also a coffee shop owner, purchased four hectares of land in the 1950s as a form of security because the young nation of Malaya was unstable, undergoing the Malayan Emergency.¹⁰⁷ The family initially had plans to work on the existing farm on his new plot of land, home to mature rubber, clove, and nutmeg trees. Unfortunately, the earnings from these harvests were insufficient. It wasn't until 1977 that Tan Cheng Hor's father sold half of the property for financial gain and converted the remaining land for durian cultivation, all the while maintaining his day job as a beverage

¹⁰⁵ The Chinese Malaysian identity embodies the phenomenon of cultural continuity. The older farmers I interviewed who are in their seventies and eighties still spoke fondly of China. They recall nostalgic stories from their fathers of how they came to Malaya and associate Chinese cultural values with themselves. According to Tan (2000, 65), 'if Chinese Malaysian continue to be interested in the civilisation of China and [Chinese things] such as traditional values and philosophy, this is because these things are relevant to their cultural continuity, not because they are loyal to China'. Cultural continuity is to 'share a common cultural past in China and are united by a set of common Chinese traditions' (65).

¹⁰⁶ Chang Boon Hao interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 28, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Tan Cheng Hor, video call interview by author August 9, 2021.

maker in a coffee shop. Between the late 1970s and 1980s, Chinese locals in Balik Pulau started showing increased interest in durian farming due to it becoming lucrative. These non-Hakka farmers are better known as ‘Kirzenerian’ entrepreneurs because they started planting durians during the narrowing and standardising durian varieties phase, which will be expounded in Chapter Three.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysia underwent significant policy shifts, including changes in national education and cultural policies that leaned towards pro-Malay sentiments, largely a result of the 1969 racial riots (Carstens 1999, 326).¹⁰⁸ The political move by the government towards nationalism nudged the Chinese Malaysians to focus on their ethnic identity as a whole rather than their specific Chinese speech group identity. It was crucial for the Chinese to be part of national politics, to defend and fight for the vision of Malaysia’s future. And to do so, they had to unite, as reflected in the Malaysia Chinese Association (MCA) slogan of the 1970s: ‘Chinese unity is a means to national unity’ (Siow 1983, 177). Over time, this led to a decline in the salience of speech group identities within the broader Chinese Malaysian identity.¹⁰⁹ Constable pointed that Hakkas in Malaysia are far less conscious of their Hakka identity compared to Hakka in Taiwan, Hong Kong or Calcutta and, ‘In the new context other allegiances, based on local or on Chinese (as opposite to Malay) identity, have taken on a greater relevance’ (1996, 31). Hence, the social reality of being a Chinese Malaysian is ‘authority-defined,’ which plays an important and relevant role in social, economic, and political spheres. Meanwhile, the importance of Chinese speech group identities has become mostly confined to social interactions within the same dialect groups or within the family setting.

¹⁰⁸ On national cultural policy, the first policy was formulated in 1971 by the National Cultural Congress through the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports. It frustrated non-Malay groups because it placed Malay culture and Islam at the forefront of Malaysian culture (Carstens 1999, 19; Michael Hsiao and Lim 2015, 35).

¹⁰⁹ The low Hakka consciousness is also witnessed in other Hakka communities in Malaysia (see Carstens 2005; Heggheim 2011; Chin and Chang 2022).

It is not surprising that the Hakka durian farmers today find it difficult to express how they identify as a Hakka person, although discernible patterns of self-ascription do exist.¹¹⁰ Tan Pak Sin mused, ‘Most of the people who ended up in Balik Pulau are Hakkas. Our everyday life is who we are as Hakka people. Are there any differences with other Chinese groups? I am unsure.’¹¹¹ Besides language serving as a distinct Chinese speech group cultural marker, most durian farmers identify the various Chinese speech groups as culturally Chinese instead of pointing out their specific cultural differences, as Chang Boon Hao remarked, ‘Only the language is different, the culture is the same!’¹¹² The development of Malaysia’s socio-political scene shaped the socio-cultural identity of these farmers. As their identities are socially constructed, they experience cultural assimilation and integration among various Chinese speech groups, gradually finding less relevance with their Chinese speech group identity alongside traditional cultural markers, and in this case between being Hakka and working as a farmer. Instead, they view their culture as ordinary, the practices they perform daily as who they are.

To conclude, Hakka durian farmers started cultivating durians in the 1950s through the practice of genetic experimentation of durians as they were living together as a close-knit community. They cultivated durians through natural breeding by selecting good seeds and learned various grafting methods to produce the Penang durians we know today. They also explored various fertilising techniques. Continuing the traditional practice or vocation of farming is not about passively replicating a fixed pattern of behaviour and being caught in a loop of perpetual cycles; rather it is about carrying on actively, improvising with their

¹¹⁰ There are patterns of self-ascription among these Chinese durian farmers. They could identify which Chinese speech group they are from and interestingly, some farmers identify with a group that is most personal to them. There are no structural consequences to this decision of theirs. For example, Chong Chok Yin is of Hakka descent but identifies more as a Hokkien because his Hokkien mother brought him up. Another example is Tan Cheng Hor, who introduced himself as a Teochew and, later in the interview, admitted that he is Foochow. He said it was easier to identify himself as Teochew since he grew up in a Teochew community.

¹¹¹ Tan Pak Sin, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 21, 2021.

¹¹² Chang Boon Hao, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 25, 2021.

surrounding resources as they 'follow the wind' and enlarging their creative capacities. It is evident from the narratives concerning everyday durian farming practices that a significant portion of their lives is devoted to this fruit.

Their practices on the farm embody their culture as Balik Pulau Hakka durian farmers. Through these quotidian activities, these Hakka farmers define their socio-cultural identity and this extends to non-Hakka farmers as well who entered the durian cultivation scene in the late 1970s. Influenced by socio-political factors, these farmers exhibit low levels of Chinese speech group consciousness, leading to a focus on a more integrated ethnic and national identity. The Chinese Malaysian cultural identity continues to evolve and shift in these farmers' lives as it takes into consideration the underlying historical and systemic production of being a Chinese person in Balik Pulau. As Hallam and Ingold (2007, 7) assert, 'Real people, as the living organisms they are, continually create themselves and one another, forging their histories and traditions as they go along'. This captures the essence of how culture is actively produced, legitimised, and rendered believable through the ordinary practices of Balik Pulau durian farmers.

Table 1. Durian varieties mentioned in Chapter Two are arranged in local durian variety names, durians registered by the DOA, and Penang durian origins

Mother Tree	Local Durian Variety Names ^a			Durian Registered by DOA			Penang Durian Origins	
	Hokkien/ Numbers	Mandarin	English/Malay	Registration Number (Name)	Person/ Organization	Registration Date	Founder Name	Location
-	-	-	-	D24	-	30 November 1937	-	-
-	-	-	-	D2 (Dato Nina)	-	1934	-	-
-	-	Mao Shan Wang (猫山王)	Musang King	D197 (Raja Kunyit/ Musang King)	Wee Chong Beng	9 December 1993	-	-
-	Ang Hae	Hong Xia (红虾)	Red Prawn	D175 (Udang Merah)	-	4 June 1990	Lee Teck Hin	Pondok Upeh, Balik Pulau
-	Hor Lor	Hu Lu (葫芦)	-	D163 (Hotor/Labu)	Chat Fatt Hin	30 June 1987	-	-
-	-	Mi Tang (蜜糖)	Honey	-	-	-	Chang Boon Hao	Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau
-	Kan Yao	-	Ganja	D158 (Kan Yan/ Tangkai Panjang)	Hj. Omar Hj. Bin	30 June 1987	-	-
-	-	-	-	D105 (Ganja/ Taiping 3)	Awang Hj. Yaakob	17 June 1970	-	-
-	-	-	-	D130 (Kan Yau T.63)	DOA	14 June 1973	-	-
Kan Yao/ Ganja	Ochee	Hei Ci (黑刺)	Black Thorn	D200 (Ochee)	Leow Cheok Kiang	2016	-	-
	Ogao	Hei Hou Zi (林风娇)	Black Monkey	D53	-	27 May 1940	-	-
Ogao	-	Lin Feng Jiao (林风娇)	Jackie Chan's Wife	-	-	-	Song Wah Sin	Balik Pulau

-	Chanee	-	-	D123 (Chanee)	Pertab Singh	14 June 1971	-	-
Chanee	D15	-	-	D177 (Juara 90 Penang)	Lee Tek Hin	4 June 1990	-	-
Chanee/ D15	Chae Phoay	Qing Pi 15 (青皮 15)/ Qing Long (青龙)	Green Skin 15/ Green Dragon	D165 (Cheh Chee)	Lee Toh Sem	30 June 1987	Yong Jing San/ Kuan Yee Yin	Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau
-	Khun Poh	-	-	D164 (Ang Bak/ Isi Merah)	Teoh Eng Eng	30 June 1987	Liew Khun Poh	Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau
-	-	Zhu Chun (朱春)	-	-	-	-	Zhu Chun	-
-	604	-	-	D166	Lee Toh Sem	30 June 1987	Chang Hui Huang/ Chang Gui Feng and Chang Yong Hua	Balik Pulau
-	600	-	-	-	-	-	Liew Kee Siong	Balik Pulau
-	700	-	-	-	-	-	-	Balik Pulau
Khun Poh	Ang Bak Kia	-	-	-	-	-	-	Balik Pulau
-	Ang Jin	Hong Ren (紅仁)	Red Yolk	-	-	-	-	Balik Pulau
-	Lan Jiao Yuan	-	-	D178 (Penang 88)	Teh Han Seng	4 June 1990	-	Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau
-	-	Xiao Hong (小红)	Little Red	-	-	-	Liew Yu Chai	Sungai Pinang, Balik Pulau

Sources: *The Durian Tourist's Guide to Penang* by Lindsay Gasik (2018), Varieties Registered for National Crop List–Durian by the DOA (n.d.), and my interviews with durian farmers.

^a A variety of durian names are used among the local communities and tourists based on their spoken languages. Although most of these names were labelled by the Hakka community, Hokkien names were used instead. This is because most of the durians are sold to the Hokkien people in George Town, who are the majority Chinese speech group in Penang. Thus, Hokkien names were given to ease communication and business transactions. Hakka durian names are only used among the Hakka community in Balik Pulau. Some of the durian names are strictly numbers, and they are usually spoken in Hokkien or Mandarin.

Chapter 3: The Balik Pulau Durian Industry (late 1970s onwards)

‘I remember when I was around twenty years old when I tasted both my Ang Hae and my father’s Ang Hae... I found out that my father’s Ang Hae tasted better than mine. Why?’¹¹³

Chang Tuan Jin recounted the above when he had an epiphany after sampling durians from a tree his late father planted in the 1950s and comparing it to one he himself had planted at the end of the 1970s. The three-decade gap between the two trees yielded durians of differing tastes, and he was able to distinguish the older durian as more refined. Such a comparison was only feasible due to early cultivation efforts by his father and Chang Tuan Jin’s own sustained involvement in durian planting. This moment of clarity incited an innovative idea: the concept of ‘durian delivery’. Though common today, this concept was virtually unheard of in the past, especially the 1980s.¹¹⁴ Instead, durian farmers would sell their freshly harvested durians to the durian wholesaler, also known as middlemen. The latter are crucial in delivering and marketing the durians to durian sellers (retailers). The negotiation between durian farmers and middlemen occurs on their farms before harvesting season or on the wholesale durian sites during the durian season.

This moment of insight arose because Chang Tuan Jin felt a sense of injustice for the middlemen to group his mediocre Ang Hae with his father’s superior Ang Hae, charging the same price for both. These middlemen would buy durians based on the durian varietal and size but discount the age of the durian trees as they are not morphologically assessable in the standardisation process. Realising that his discovery did not conform to the prevailing durian

¹¹³ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

¹¹⁴ There are a few reasons why durian farmers in Balik Pulau do not sell their durians directly to customers. Most durians produced in Balik Pulau are sold in Penang’s east side, especially George Town. Durian farmers shared that they do not sell durians in Balik Pulau because everyone has durian trees. Before the 1980s, the transportation system was less accessible. The task of harvesting durians is a full day endeavour, as the collection of the fruit occurs at three distinct intervals throughout the day. Consequently, balancing the responsibilities of harvesting and directly selling durians to customers proved too taxing for most durian farmers.

supply chain model, Chang Tuan Jin decided to take matters into his own hands. Motivated by his newfound discovery, he wanted to share the wonder and appreciation of eating well-aged durian trees with others. His durian delivery strategy was to sell a single durian variety but harvested from two durian trees of a significant age gap, 'I sold two durians at once—my father's and mine'. This method allowed customers to assess their preferences, and as predicted, customers would opt to buy his father's durians in subsequent purchases. Drawing a parallel, Chang Tuan Jin opined that durian is similar to Pu'er tea, whose flavour improves with age but at a higher cost.

This short excerpt of Chang Tuan Jin's personal experience serves as one of the many contributory factors to the development of the durian industry in Penang from the late 1970s onwards. Two ongoing phases emerged from this period: (1) the narrowing and standardising of durian varieties and (2) the marketing and sales of durians with value added services led to the advent of durian tourism from the 1990s until today. The first part of this chapter explores the first phase. This phase transpired due to the structural changes in Balik Pulau and the durian industry, which plays a part in the emergence of the durian-tourism phenomenon. The first section also examines the shift in durian farmers' socio-cultural identities across generations, particularly between Fathers and Sons. The occupational continuity of the farmers across different generations has taken on various forms as the durian industry experienced a 'boundary shift' (Ploeg and Renting 2004).¹¹⁵ This demonstrates the farmers' socio-cultural identity as a 'production, which is never complete, always in the process, and always constitute within, not outside, representation' (Hall 1990, 222). Chapter Two previously established that the practices of Hakka farmers in Balik Pulau can be conceptualised as 'culture is ordinary'. This chapter extends that framework to encompass all

¹¹⁵ Boundary shift is explained under Chapter 3.2.

Chinese farmers, highlighting their everyday lives as Balik Pulau Chinese durian farmers who entered the durian industry scene in the late 1970s.

The second part of this chapter explores the second phase—durio tourism from the 1990s until today—by defining, conceptualising, and applying the concept of ‘boundary shift’ (Ploeg and Renting 2004). ‘Boundary shift’ conceptualises the rural changes in Balik Pulau through the lens of durio-tourism. These ‘boundary shifts’ serves to further strengthen the durio-tourism economy in Balik Pulau. This section also analyses the Chinese durian farmers’ ‘cultural styles’ (Nonini 2017) as they performed their identities in the presence of a Chinese female student researcher (me), and in relation to their perceptions of the Penang DOA officers and Malay farmers. The DOA officers’ cultural styles are also explored similarly. Ferguson posits that cultural styles are practices that ‘signify differences between social categories’ (quoted in Nonini 2017, 18), which becomes evident in their respective perceptions of one another. In addition to contributing to a more holistic understanding of Balik Pulau Chinese farmers’ identity, the analysis illuminates the status and ongoing development of the Balik Pulau durian industry. This chapter further elaborates on the historical development of the durian industry from the late 1970s to the current state of affairs in Balik Pulau.

3.1 The Emergence of Durio-tourism in Balik Pulau

‘How old are your durian trees?’—This is one of the many questions I ask durian farmers. Responses vary, ranging from five-year-old Ochee to centenarian *durian kampung*; however, most indicated that their durian trees are approximately 40 years old. This suggests that most of these durian trees were planted from the 1970s to the 1980s and mainly consist

of clonal Penang durian varieties.¹¹⁶ As previously analysed, prior to the 1970s, Hakka durian farmers focused on experimenting with cultivating and grafting a wide selection of durian cultivars. After a season of trial and error, there was a gradual shift in farmers' practices. Instead of planting new durian seeds, they started narrowing down the broad durian varieties and focused on cultivating specific durian varieties that were more well-received by the community. This selective cultivation led to the emergence of brand consciousness around durian varieties. Brand consciousness is a phenomenon that occurs with the introduction of durian varieties that goes through a form of refinement as certain varieties are preferred over others, legitimising them as better (Airriess 2020a, 9). Additionally, farmers chopped off low-value durian trees and grafted them. These practices of narrowing and standardising durian varieties were prevalent from the late 1970s to the 1980s, peaking in the 1980s. These durians have come to be known as 'designer durians' (Cheah 2015).

It was also around this time when durian farmers were encouraged to join durian competitions hosted by the DOA of Penang every year.¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, there was no track record of the durian winners by the Penang DOA,¹¹⁸ but award-winning durian varieties such as Lee Teck Hin's Ang Hae created a huge demand not only locally but internationally; Singapore's Four Seasons hotel exported it by airfreight (Chew 1985). In exchange for winning the cash prize and trophy, the DOA reserves the right to visit the winner's durian farm and extract bud wood samples from the winning durian tree for propagation. Durian nurseries also capitalised on this opportunity to produce and supply saplings of the winning

¹¹⁶ The phenomenon also occurred around other states such as Perak and Pahang in Malaysia planting mainly D24 (Gasik 2018, 49, 170; Zakaria 2020, 5). Montanari (2011b, 99) noted 'in the 1970s to 1980s that genetic breeding became practiced extensively for large-scale commercial purpose: 19 clones were registered between 1934 and 1955; 43 in the early 1970s; and 56 between 1981 and 1993'.

¹¹⁷ The earliest recorded durian competition in Penang dates back to 1905 and was known as the Penang Agricultural Show (Ridley 1905). According to Encik Azrul, durian competitions had several event and festival names in the Malay language such as: (1) *Hari Peladang, Penternak dan Nelayan Kebangsaan*, (2) *Pesta Durian*, (3) *Pesta Buah-buahan*. These three names are not interchangeable as they are separate events, held at various locations around the Penang state, namely Balik Pulau, Relau, and Seberang Jaya.

¹¹⁸ Encik Azrul, interview by author, February 18, 2022.

variety. Lim Boon Teong, the head of the DOA in Penang, aimed to catalogue Penang's best durians (Gasik 2018, 49). Collectively, these initiatives further accentuate durian brand consciousness, as both farmers and consumers create demand for designer durians.



Figure 8: Chang Fatt Hin's certificate

Source: Photograph taken from Xu Yuquan's newspaper article, '浮罗山背的溜连狂人 *fuluoshanbei de liulian kuangren* (Balik Pulau's Durian Manic)' in Sin Chew Plus (Special Focus), 2018

Lim Boon Teong registered ten of the winning durian varieties from 1987 to 1991 (Refer to Table 1), and thereafter, there has been no durians registered from Balik Pulau to this date (DOA n.d.). The Relau Agrotourism Station (formerly Relau Agriculture Research Station), also led by Lim Boon Teong, played a role in developing the durian industry. It

houses a 1.5 ha durian germplasm collection with other tropical fruits but was abandoned after he left (Gasik 2018, 284). Fortunately, a proposal to turn the research station into an agro-horticultural park was presented in August 2000 (SERI 2000). Since 2011, there has been a rebranding effort to turn it into an agrotourism centre, with durian as the main attraction. The station identifies 48 durian varieties out of the 352 durian trees planted there (DOA Penang 2021).



Figure 9: A video screenshot of the Balik Pulau-Ayer Itam foot pathway

Source: Recorded by the author. [Click here to watch the video](#)¹¹⁹

The transportation system in Penang also improved in the 1980s. In 1983, Jalan Tun Sardon was inaugurated. It is a hill road that cuts through the hills of Mukim Six (Pondok Upeh) district in Balik Pulau from Paya Terubong (refer to Figure 10). This road has given durian farmers better access to the market, especially farmers from the inland of Balik Pulau, such as Batu Itam, Titi Teras and Pondok Upeh. Prior to this improvement and the

¹¹⁹ In the video, Wong Ze Kuan was explaining the foot pathway taken by farmers to Ayer Itam from Balik Pulau. It is a hilly route. Flat rocks were strategically placed to protect people's feet and provide a better walking experience, especially for those carrying goods on shoulder poles.

accessibility of motor vehicles, durian farmers would hire labourers to carry harvested durians by foot through the Balik Pulau-Ayer Itam road to the Ayer Itam market.¹²⁰ Wong Ze Kuan shared that almost every farm had an access road to the main road of Balik Pulau-Ayer Itam.¹²¹ Tan Pak Sin's father from Kampung Genting usually cycled to deliver his durian harvest to a wholesaler at Balik Pulau town. Hence, this was a crucial development for the farmers but it came with a cost.¹²² Two years later, in 1985, the first Penang Bridge was built, increasing the vehicular connectivity between the island and the mainland. Concurrently, there was a growth in private car ownership as household income rose (Lakhbir 1990, 10).

¹²⁰ According to Choo (1998, 119), 'before the advent of laterite then tarred roads, this was the only link into the village from the outside world. In the early 1900s, Straits Echo reported that 'as many as 1000 foot-passengers have been counted crossing the Pass in a single day' (*Straits Echo* 1905). It was the preferred way because it was the shortest route compared to Route 6 mentioned earlier in Chapter Two.

¹²¹ Wong Ze Kuan, interview by author, Balik Pulau, October 27, 2021.

¹²² Refer to Raman (1982) for the environmental and social cost building Jalan Tun Sardon.

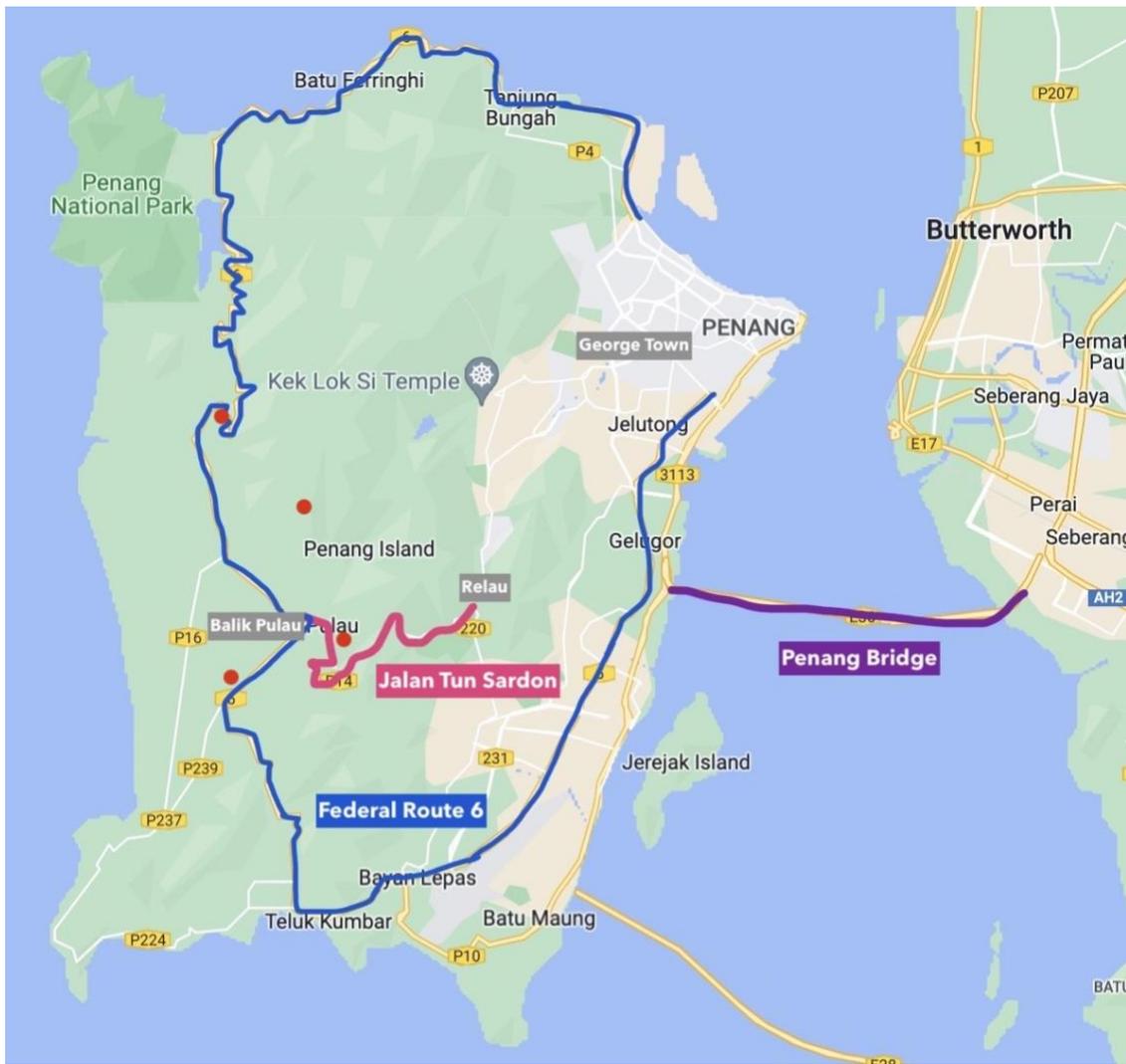


Figure 10: A map of Penang Island showing the road names and transport roads of Jalan Tun Sardon, Federal Route 6, and Penang Bridge

Source: Screenshot from Google Maps and annotated by the author.

Around the same time, in 1986, the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) Malaysia unveiled a master plan for the agricultural development of Penang based on the National Agricultural Policy (NAP).¹²³ A fruit development programme was designed to intensify and rehabilitate existing fruit orchards and encourage smallholders to plant fruit trees in suitable new areas (MOA Malaysia 1985, 14). By the end of 1990, it was expected to rehabilitate a total of 425 hectares with durians on top of the existing durian planting area of 994 hectares (MOA

¹²³ NAP is from 1984-1991 under the purview of the Fifth Malaysia Plan (1986-1990). One of the objectives is to increase food production for the local market such as paddy, vegetables, fruits, and poultry to substitute the import goods (MOA Malaysia 1985, 23).

Malaysia 1985, 24). Fortunately, the total rehabilitated area in 1990 surpassed the initially proposed target, with 2765 hectares of durians planted in Penang (DOA Semenanjung Malaysia 1995, 42).¹²⁴ Despite this increase in durian production, there was a decrease in total agriculture production in Penang, as the focus shifted towards the manufacturing sector (Said 2019, 174).

Whilst there was an ongoing durian varietal selection process by the farmers, Penang remains a model for durian diversity as they managed to preserve a large pool of Penang durians compared to other durian-producing states. As these durian farmers put it, Penang customers are spoiled for choice as they prefer to have various durian flavours and textures throughout the durian season.¹²⁵ To meet these customers' demands, durian farmers in Penang grew durian varieties that were in trend and available around their vicinity. As one of my interlocutors emphasised, 'If farmers who live opposite the hills grew Hor Lor, then you should grow Hor Lor; if they grow Ang Hae, then you should also do the same'.¹²⁶ Consequently, individual durian farms tend to have similar yet diverse varieties of durian trees, usually ranging from 20 to 30 varieties. This consistency of producing the same durian varieties resulted in 'standardised taste, and more predictable and consistent harvests' (Montanari 2011, 99), contributing to the development of durio-tourism.

¹²⁴ The increase of durian cultivation efforts in Penang was in tandem with the increase of durian production in Peninsular Malaysia. The Crop Hectarage Statistics of Peninsular Malaysia between 1984 to 1993 recorded an upward trend from 29,210 hectares to 83,323 hectares contributed significantly by Johor as they were involved in the export market to Singapore.

¹²⁵ Several durian farmers commented that Penang customers are the most difficult because they do not only demand different durian varieties, but also nit-pick on durians often. In the process of standardising durians, the varieties chosen matured at different rates meaning there were a range of durian varieties to savour from over the duration of the season.

¹²⁶ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

貓山王	小紅	600
甲必里	紅仁	604
朱春紅	紅肉 <i>Lipan</i>	666
坤寶紅	青皮仔	916
黑刺	<i>Green skin</i> 青皮 15	118
紅蝦	黃肉 <i>Lipan</i>	101
葫蘆	紅梅花	D 14
竹脚	成龍	D 11

名种占必力，山竹和红毛丹

Figure 11: A durian farmers' name card, listing the durian varieties that he cultivates

Source: Photographed by the author.

All the structures outlined above are integral systems that have propelled the development of the durian industry. They operate in tandem with the rise of Kirznerian farmers in Balik Pulau, including both Hakka and non-Hakka farmers, thereby reflecting practice theory. 'Following the wind', these Chinese locals seized this opportunity and started cultivating clonal durians. Durian was the talk of Balik Pulau town as its prices were on the rise, earning the title as the rich man's fruit (*The Straits Times* 1979; *Utusan Konsumer* 1980). In a span of ten years from 1983 to 1993, the planted area increased 77 per cent, from 994 hectares to 4246 hectares (MOA Malaysia 1985; DOA Semenanjung Malaysia 1995; DOA Penang 1996; Jawatankuasa Pertanian Perikanan Penternakan Negeri Pulau Pinang 1997).

The interaction between the structures and Chinese durian farmers' practices formed the foundation of durio-tourism that gradually emerged in the 1980s. Before delving into the second phase: durio-tourism, where we continue to explore how durian farmers 'follow the wind', it is important to explain the concepts of 'Fathers' and 'Sons' mentioned earlier in the Introduction. Between the late 1970s and 1980s, Sons were learning the ropes of being a

farmer and becoming more involved in the durian industry.¹²⁷ Their Fathers have passed the baton to them for the management of the farm. As both Fathers and Sons ‘grow older together, they continually participate in each other’s coming-into-being’ (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 6). Even though there is an occupational continuity among farmers intergenerationally, it takes on different forms. This means durian farmers’ practices are not exclusively focused on what Fathers did: genetic experimentation of durians through cultivating and grafting. It has expanded to include marketing, sales and educating consumers on the art of eating durian.

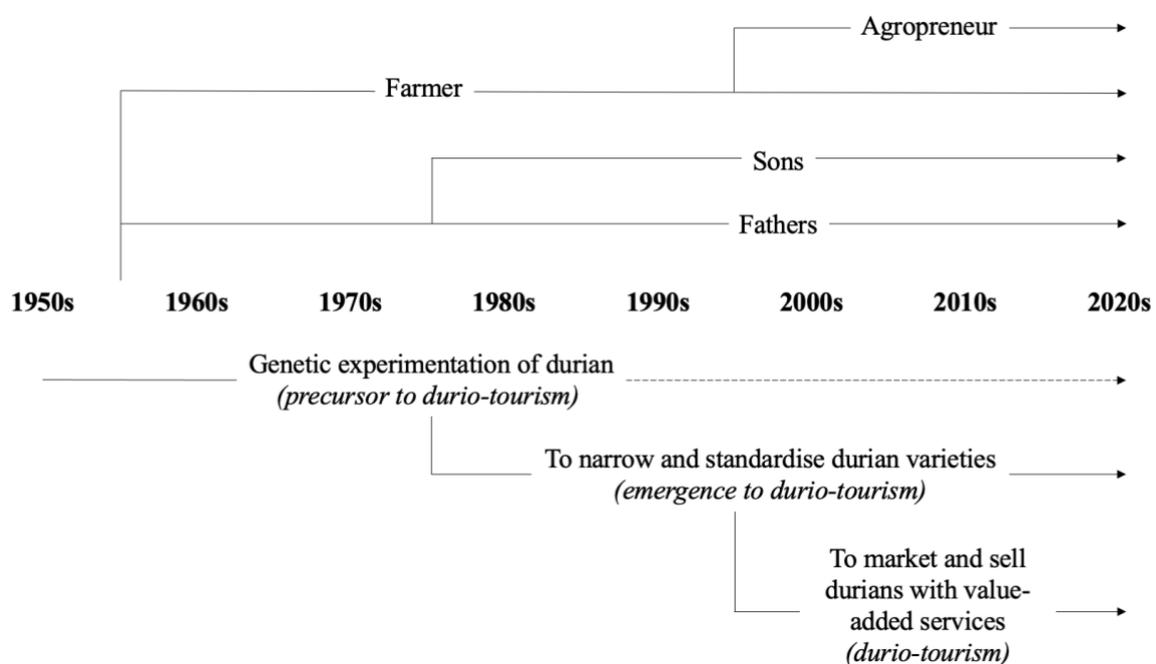


Figure 12: The timeline of Balik Pulau Chinese farmers' practices, socio-cultural identity, and the phases of durio-tourism

The occupational continuity of the Hakka farmers’ identity is not an accomplished fact but ‘identity as a “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always

¹²⁷ Not all of the Sons continued to work on the farm. Some of them had the opportunity to further their tertiary education, and some decided to work in a different industry. However, since the late 2000s, Sons came back to be more involved in the durian farm. Nevertheless, farms are increasingly being sold as no family members would like to take over. Through my interview with the DOA, there is an increasing number of private companies buying over these plots of lands.

constituted within, not outside, representation’ (Hall 1990, 222). This implies that their everyday practices as farmers continually influence their identity to shift with the ongoing structural changes. The durian industry in Balik Pulau in the mid to late 1990s was starting to enter a ‘boundary shift’ (Ploeg and Renting 2004, 234) as farmers’ socio-cultural identity is moving from merely being a farmer (generally practised by Fathers) to an agropreneur. This will be analysed further in the next section. Today, durian farmers continue to sell their durians to durian wholesalers. However, they now have the option to handle sales themselves, such as selling durians at their farm, and giving customers a delectable farm-to-table gastronomic experience.

3.2 The Boundary Shift in Balik Pulau’s Durio-tourism

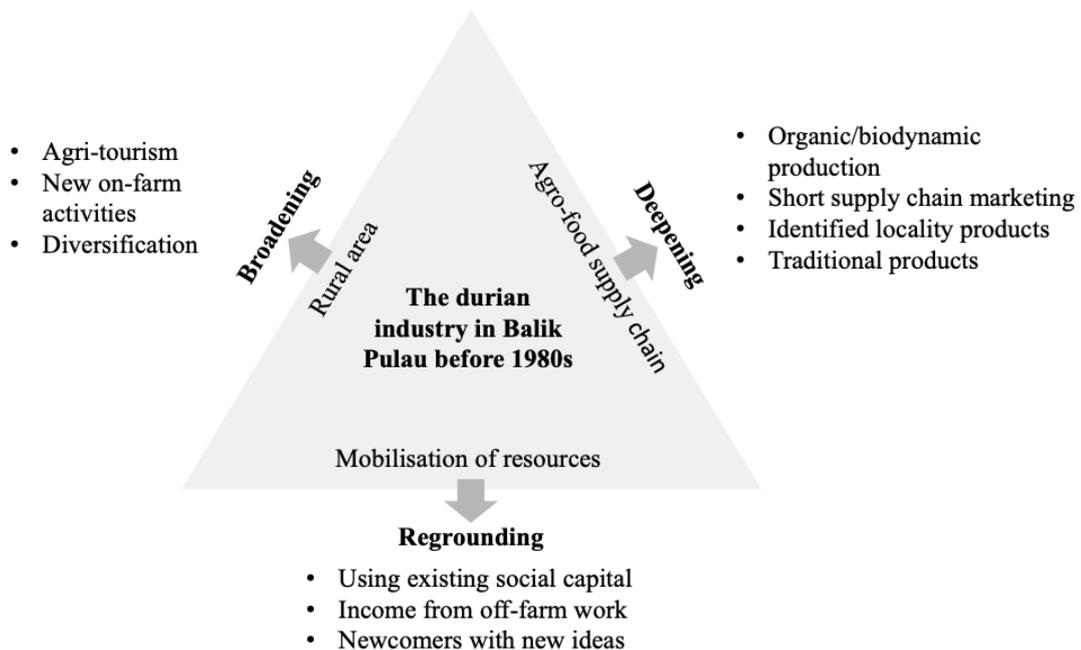


Figure 13: Visualising the changes in Balik Pulau's durian industry, following Ploeg and Renting (2004)

The ‘boundary shift’ conceptualises the rural changes in Balik Pulau that began to form in the mid to late 1990s and continue to be shaped today through durio-tourism.¹²⁸ The shift can be explained through three key points: deepening, broadening, and regrounding (Ploeg and Renting 2004, 235), which will be expanded on in the remaining chapter. Deepening focuses on the localities of production and employs a shorter market supply chain (Preston and Ngah 2012, 353). The diverse durians grown in Penang are always marketed proudly as ‘Penang durians,’ placing focus on the quality of the durians rather than on quantity (*Star Online* 2006).

Due to Penang Island's limited agricultural land, durian prioritise quality over quantity. The Penang durian industry also promotes a short supply chain because it has made itself a durian-centred tourist attraction as the durians have a short senescence process (Mariani 2018, 5). Tourists from around the world, especially China would visit the area exclusively to eat durians. It is known that tourists from China can eat durian all day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The durian farmers are also broadening the durian industry by diversifying on-farm activities to include agro-tourism, offering farm stays that feature various on-farm activities to be experienced by tourists.

The combination of the unique durian characteristics and the availability of farm stay in Penang encourage tourists to travel to Penang for the freshest durian possible. Chang Soi Loon promotes his durian to be eaten at the ‘golden time’ as he calls it *huangjing shijian* 黄精时间 in Mandarin.¹²⁹ It is only present in a short timeframe where all flavours and sensations (sweet, alcoholic, bitter, floral, and numb) and can be tasted at once, mostly from old tree durians. He shared that there is nothing special about the durian after the golden time.

¹²⁸ According to Preston and Ngah (2012) on boundary shift, ‘although conceived largely in the context of a focus on European change, [they] feel that it can aid a better understanding of the dynamics of rural changes in Malaysia’.

¹²⁹ Chang Soi Loon, interview by Khoo Gaik Cheng and author at Balik Pulau, July 16, 2020.

This golden time is a waiting game on a durian farm and in this experience, when the durian falls and is being harvested, there is a build-up of anticipation in durian lovers as they may watch the durian farmer perform an ‘uninterrupted choreography that revolves around the fruit’ (Mariani 2018, 11).¹³⁰ When the fruit is opened, durian consumers are taught to engage with their sense and taste in identifying the flavours and sensations.

To learn how to sell and market durians, durian farmers are now required to test and sample every durian. In the past, some durian farmers shared that their fathers did not allow them to eat the durians on their farm, especially sellable ones, because they are harvested to be sold to middlemen. But times have changed. Today’s durian farmers feel the need to be fully acquainted with all the different nodes and flavours that their durians offer. Tourists are taught to widen their palate and taste a variety of durians. The durian farmers regard their roles not just as farmers, but also as cultural ambassadors of Penang durians in the tourism industry.

Recalling Chang Tuan Jin’s story earlier, when he started selling durians, he had to learn how to match his customers’ requests and expectations with durians available on his farm.¹³¹ Tan Cheng Hor also faced a similar challenge when he started to sell his own durians.¹³² He observed other durian sellers and questioned how he can emulate their sales techniques. From there, he made it his mission to try all types of durian varieties at different hours; when the durians are still ‘asleep’ or ‘awakened’.¹³³ However, today, Tan Cheng Hor is more aware of his durian intake for health reasons. Durian flavours can be roughly

¹³⁰ According to Leo Mariani (2018, 10), the durian will undergo five types of assessment before it is opened: (1) visual examination, (2) weighing the durian, (3) smelling by touching the nose between the thumb and the index which rest on the husk, (4) light shaking, and (5) tapping the fingernails, a stick or the handle of a knife.

¹³¹ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

¹³² Tan Cheng Hor, video call interview by author August 9, 2021.

¹³³ Durians are awakened when they hit the ground, meaning that the senescence process of the durian have started. To slow down the senescence process, durian farmers would either place nets under durian trees or tie each individual durian to the tree branches. Since these durians have not hit the ground, they are still asleep and farmers will hit them on the ground to wake them up, evoking durian flavours and aroma before serving them.

predicted because specific durian cultivars may have a more robust flavour than others. For example, Kapri, the white-fleshed durian, is known to have a bitter profile, but ‘nobody knows which way the durian [flavour] will go’ (Mariani 2018, 10).

The broadening of the durian industry also had government support. In the early 1990s, a national plan and report—the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), reported on the progress of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995), noting that educational tourism sectors such as agro-tourism had been developed (EPU 1996). Although Balik Pulau was not explicitly cited as a potential agro-tourism spot, the Penang State Tourism Action Plan 1992/3 included a chapter on agro-tourism as an agro-touristic attraction (EPU of Penang 1992). One of the activities in agrotourism is the ‘promotion of orchard plantations’. The plan also recommended that plantations improve facilities such as public toilets, safety features, infrastructure, and signage. Tourism products such as Balik Pulau fruits were also suggested. Nevertheless, in 1997, the Review of Penang Tourism Action Plan focused only on traditional Malay villages and did not mention the fruit farms (Penang State Tourism Council 1997). Although it was not implemented yet, efforts were made by the Penang state government through the Penang Development Corporation; a state agency that taught durian farmers how to market their durians by having value added services.¹³⁴ The effort of the government in durio-tourism continues to this day.

¹³⁴ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

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Map of Penang showing locations: Rainbow Paradise Beach Resort, Hotel Sentral Seaview, George Town, Berjaya Hotel, Vouk Hotel Suites, Hotel Royal, 8321 Durian Plantation, Bayview Hotel, Cititel Hotel, Balik Pulau, Lexis Suites Penang, Teluk Kumbar.

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Figure 14: A durio-tourism poster promoting durian packages in 2019. It is a collaboration between 8321 Durian Plantation and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture

Source: Poster taken from Tourism Malaysia official website (<https://www.tourism.gov.my/media/view/durian-packages-back-by-popular-demand-eat-as-much-durian-as-you-can>)

The deepening of this rural change can also be seen through an unconventional cultivation method: organic and biodynamic farming (Ploeg and Renting 2004, 236). In the early 1990s, Chang Tuan Jin made this transition when he encountered a tourist from Hawaii who questioned why there were no bees on his farm. This question gave him an epiphany and made him realise that if durians are so fragrant, where are the insects and animals (Xu 2018, 6)? The transition from conventional to organic farming was a difficult period for the durian trees and for Chang Tuan Jin financially.¹³⁵ Today, his son has taken over with the

¹³⁵ Chang Tuan Jin, video call interview by author, February 15, 2022.

biodynamic farming method. Both Tan Pak Sin and Tan Cheng Hor also adopted organic farming methods when they took over from their fathers.

To improve the quality of the durian produced as part of deepening the durian industry in Balik Pulau, the government introduced MyGAP, short for Malaysian Good Agricultural Practices.¹³⁶ Although initially met with resistance, particularly from Chinese durian farmers, adoption rates have risen significantly.¹³⁷ Kie Ngim Zui once proudly mentioned that he does not need MyGAP to define his farm as a good farm; he believes the symbiotic relationship between plants and animals/insects is proof enough of a farm's quality.¹³⁸ However, he has since registered his farm. The increase of participants in MyGAP is made possible by both durian farmers as well as DOA officials' efforts. To achieve that, I see their cultural styles in play.

When I asked Encik Halim from the Penang DOA about the ongoing MyGAP application progress, he responded positively. He mentioned the names of several Chinese durian farmers that were a great help to DOA in encouraging other durian farmers to participate in MyGAP.¹³⁹ Hearing these farmers' names caught me by surprise because I remember vividly their perception of the DOA officers as incompetent and lackadaisical. These farmers also immediately equated the DOA officers with the Malay stereotype of being lazy.¹⁴⁰ So, when these farmers communicate with the DOA officers, they present a different front as outwardly supportive of the government programs. Encik Najib and Encik Azrul

¹³⁶ MyGAP rebranded as SALM (*Skim Akreditasi Ladang Malaysia* or Malaysia Farm Accreditation Scheme) in 2013. It adopted this national public good agricultural standard since 2002 and the implementation and accreditation are managed by the DOA (Amekawa et al. 2017).

¹³⁷ Encik Halim, interview by author, Balik Pulau, February 21, 2022. It was difficult because MyGAP requires durian farmers to do reporting and documenting which the durian farmers were not familiar with and find it troublesome. There was also the issue of language barrier as farmers would fill up the reports in Mandarin and sometimes the receipts that they submit are written in Mandarin as well.

¹³⁸ Kie Ngim Zui, interview by author, Balik Pulau, July 17, 2020.

¹³⁹ The word 'Encik' is a courtesy title for Mr in the Malay language. In this thesis, I have chosen to use Encik instead of Mr as that was how they were addressed.

¹⁴⁰ Majority of the government workers in DOA are ethnically Malay based on my observation and the name list by the Penang State Government in iDirektori (Kerajaan Negeri Pulau Pinang n.d.).

shared that the farmers always participate in the workshops and events organised by the DOA, even though they are far more knowledgeable in farming. Out of curiosity, I asked these DOA officers, ‘Why would they attend if they already have the knowledge?’

Encik Najib who felt it was a psychological game when dealing with these farmers, replied, ‘Since they think they are more advanced than the DOA officers, you need to humble yourself and listen to them.’¹⁴¹ Durian farmers shared that they attend these programs to keep themselves updated with the latest knowledge or techniques, although they might have differing opinions. They also saw this as an opportunity to inform the DOA officers of the incorrect type of fertiliser supplied to them. Two bags of fertiliser are provided as part of the yearly subsidy by the government, procured by the DOA from fertiliser companies.

According to one farmer, they were occasionally given fertilisers suitable for paddy and oil palm planting. Fortunately, the farmer said, ‘When we (the farmers) voice out, then they will give the correct fertilisers’ but sometimes they are also met with disappointment when they are informed, ‘*ini sahaja*’—that is all we have, without any follow-up action. With MyGAP, durian farmers shared that they are able to access many benefits that were previously not accessible, such as bush cutters, ladders, and agrochemical storehouses. A farmer said, ‘When we apply for MyGAP, we have better power because there are protocols to follow’.

A MyGAP certified farm is also allowed to export their durians and demand a higher price for durians. The government pushed for this good agricultural standard to promote food safety, aligning with agro-tourism initiatives. The recommended levels of agrochemical usage also make the farms safer for tourists. Encik Johar, a village leader in Balik Pulau, shared that Malay durian farms are not as nicely manicured as the Chinese ones and that the Chinese farms look more inviting.¹⁴² These cultural styles of the Chinese durian farmers and Malay

¹⁴¹ Encik Najib, interview by author, Balik Pulau, February 21, 2022.

¹⁴² Encik Johar, interview by author, Balik Pulau February 23, 2022.

DOA officers are always being performed to one another and ‘often in the presence of a third group’ (Nonini 2017, 18), and in this context, that third group is me.

The last key component of ‘boundary shift’, entails the concept of ‘regrounding’. To ‘reground’ is to involve ‘existing social networks in communities to facilitate the inclusion of non-farm work into the household economy and having newcomers in rural communities who take up farming or engage in new, rural-based activities’ (Preston and Ngah 2012, 353). In the 1980s, Benny Wong and Chong Chok Yin’s fathers, retired government workers of Hakka descent, chose to nurture their ancestral land that had been previously leased to other farmers. Sons contributed to this ‘regrounding’, by stepping in to finance the durian farm, helping their fathers during the durian season, or more crucially quitting their jobs to join their fathers on the farm. Farmers like Robert Lee, Tan Pak Sin, Chong Chok Yin, and Tan Cheng Hor were involved in ‘regrounding’. Their primary motivation to manage their family's farms stems from a sense of familial obligation and the responsibility to maintain their inheritance.

In closing, the durian industry from the late 1970s onwards continue to show a shift in the durian farmers’ practices. When the practice of genetic experimentation of durians gradually by the Hakka durian farmers slowed down, the market shifted its focus toward designer durians, facilitated by the narrowing and standardisation of durian varieties. This brief but transformative period was supported by various external structures and preceded the rise of durio-tourism in Penang. With the advent of durio-tourism in Penang, the durian industry in Balik Pulau entered into a ‘boundary shift’ that allowed durian farmers’ to be more entrepreneurial. They began to market their durians directly to consumers, offering value-added services and promoting the locality of Penang durians.

Conclusion

Initially, this research aimed to explore the relationship between Hakka culture and durian cultivation. In the process, I have learned ‘how to think about a situation together with one’s informant, [having the] research categories develop with the research, not before it’ (Tsing 2015, ix).¹⁴³ It is through the exploration of this question that led me to uncover that although historically, the Hakka people had a close occupational affinity with agriculture, it is no longer the case with the Hakka community in Balik Pulau today. Durian farmers themselves assert that their Hakka culture is not tied to agriculture, or in this context, durian cultivation. Instead, they identify their everyday practices as a farmer as what defines their socio-cultural identity. Although the Hakka people were the ones who collectively initiated cultivating durians on the hills in the 1950s, and there exists some form of cultural continuity, especially among older farmers, this view does not essentialise them, but instead demonstrates that their socio-cultural identities are continually being constructed alongside the development of the socio-political scene in Malaysia.

The Hakka farmers take pride in their work, having cultivated and grafted a significant variety of durians that we annually enjoy today. This has differentiated the durian industry in Penang from that of other durian-producing states. Their durian trees mature similar to fine wine and cheese, or as Chang Tuan Jin has likened them, to Pu’er tea. From the perspective of Balik Pulau durio-tourism, the current landscape of the durian industry in Penang would be vastly different without the efforts of Hakka farmers spanning two to three generations. Revisiting the earlier question posed in Chapter One—‘Why is the durian industry in Penang different and how unique are Balik Pulau durians?’—This thesis sums it up by showcasing the development of the durian industry that was built not only by the Hakka

¹⁴³ This quote by Tsing, although referenced to ethnography, in my introduction, I justified why interviews could also be used to explore the durian farmers’ practices.

farmers but the Chinese durian farmers today with an entrepreneurial spirit, localising the Penang durian through building, refining, and marketing ‘cultural terroir’ (Airriess 2020a) that invites local and international tourists and durian lovers to enjoy freshly harvested durians.¹⁴⁴

In the late 1970s to 1980s, the prices of durian increased, becoming a ‘rich man’s fruit’, and non-Hakka locals from Balik Pulau started venturing into planting the thorny green fruit for socio-economic reasons. These individuals contributed to the narrowing and standardisation of the expansive durian varieties initially produced by the Hakka durian farmers. These non-Hakka farmers also viewed their everyday practices as ordinary and part of their culture. Hence, the concept of ‘culture is ordinary’ is applicable to not only the Hakka farmers in the 1950s but also to these non-Hakka farmers. Today, the growing demand for durians, particularly from China, along with the improved market access for exporting this fruit in various forms, has led the durian industry to be designated as *Sumber Kekayaan Baru* or New Golden Commodity, a term coined by the DOA.

The New Golden Commodity is mainly attributed to durian varieties such as Musang King and Black Thorn, given that these fetch the highest market value. As a result, some durian farmers have opted to chop down their older trees and graft them with these more lucrative varieties. Broader implications for the future and sustainability of Penang’s durian industry is closely tied to durio-tourism. The practice of cutting down and replacing trees is not new and has previously been carried out with other crops, including rubber, nutmeg, and clove trees. This tendency aligns with the underlying logic that has guided farmers in their adoption of new crops. I trace this rationale and conceptualise it as ‘following the wind’. While the motivation is fundamentally economic, their actions also demonstrate a

¹⁴⁴ ‘Cultural terroir is linked to the distinctiveness of place and agricultural products, and this resource differentiation possesses market value’ (Charters 2021 as quoted in Airriess 2020a, 15).

commitment to creativity, improvisation and adaptability, characteristics that safeguard their position as modernist, capitalistic smallholder farmers.

The theoretical framework of Practice Theory is employed to examine the everyday practices of durian farmers in cultivating and managing the farm and their resources. This approach proves apt for dissecting each practice as a unit of analysis from the 1950s until today. As previously indicated, their practices progressed from genetic experimentation of cultivating and grafting durian trees to narrowing and standardisation in creating ‘designer durians’. Subsequently, the era of durio-tourism emerged, during which farmers engaged customers in the art of eating durian. The durio-tourism phase peaked before the global pandemic of COVID-19, and is currently ongoing. The shift in the durian farmers’ practices also welcomed an additional role, changing their socio-cultural identity from merely being a farmer to an agropreneur. This thesis also constantly analyses the dialectical relationship between the durian farmers’ practices and their interaction with the environment/structural availability and explores how they improvise within these contexts.

Another aspect that merits further exploration is the cultural style between the Chinese durian farmers and the DOA officers, particularly in relation to the everyday politics on the farm. This could also be extended to interactions with other governmental bodies, such as the Penang State City Council, which oversees land use in Penang and is particularly relevant given the ongoing urbanisation of agricultural land in Balik Pulau. Moreover, the agrochemical usage or fertilising and pest management practices among durian farmers across different farm management systems could be investigated to yield socio-historical insights into their environmental impact on Balik Pulau.

In writing this thesis focused on Chinese people, particularly the Hakkas, I am guided by Constable’s (1996) assertion that we do not speak for the Hakka, but rather about them. Constable emphasised that her work about the Hakka presents only a partial truth; it does not

have the final say on the Hakka identity. I hope this thesis, like the essays in Constable's edited book, contributes to the growing and ongoing discussion of Hakka identity that is declining today. The durian and its world are used as an entryway to understand the Chinese durian farmers' (or agropreneurs') practices and their rationale, which sustained these intergenerational farmers. The rationale of 'following the wind' has allowed these farmers to improvise creatively, developing their practices in three interrelated stages that continue to play an important role in the durian industry. These everyday practices are not only integral to their culture but also contribute to shaping their socio-cultural identities as Balik Pulau durian farmers.

Appendix A

Table 2. List of Durian Farmers Interviewed

Chinese speech group	Name	Age range	Generation of durian farming	Roles in the durian industry	Farming methods
Hakka	Lee Chau Yun	80s	1 st	Farmer	Conventional
	Ah Chan	80s	1 st	Farmer	Conventional
	Chong Ee Phak	70s	1 st	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
	Chang Tuan Jin	60s	2 nd	Farmer Farm stay owner	Organic
	Harry Liaw	60s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
	Chong Chok Yin	60s	2 nd	Farmer	Conventional
	Benny Wong	50s	2 nd	Farmer Wholesaler	Conventional
	Tan Pak Sin	50s	2 nd	Farmer Farm stay owner	Organic
	Robert Lee	50s	2 nd	Durian seller	Conventional
	Wong Ze Kuan	50s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
	Chang Jun Yuan	50s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
	Rachel	50s	2 nd	Farmer	Conventional
	Bai	50s	2 nd	Farmer Wholesaler	Conventional
	Jackie Liew	30s	4 th	Farmer Wholesaler	Conventional
Chang Soi Loon	20s	3 rd	Farmer Farm stay owner	Biodynamic	
Hakka/ Cantonese	Kie Ngim Zui	50s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
Hokkien	Tan Kee Tong	30s	3 rd	Durian seller	Conventional
	John Yip	40s	1 st	Farmer Durian seller Tour guide	Organic and conventional ^a
	Chang Boon Hao	50s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Conventional
Teochew/ Foochow	Tan Cheng Hor	50s	2 nd	Farmer Durian seller	Organic

^a John Yip has two different farm properties.

Appendix B

Table 3. List of Interviewed Non-Durian Farmers

Category	Names
Penang Department of Agriculture	Encik Halim
	Encik Azrul
	Encik Najib
Penang Southwest District and Land Office	Encik Johar
Fertiliser Company	Na Kim Hin
	Yong Chong Yip

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